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A MARITAL LIABILITY

ELIZABETH PHIPPS TRAIN

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**She had come suddenly upon a man, sitting in a chair,
with hands nervously gripping the arms.**

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MARITAL LIABILITY

By
ELIZABETH PHIPPS TRAIN
AUTHOR OF
'A SOCIAL HIGHWAYMAN,' "THE AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF
A PROFESSIONAL BEAUTY," ETC.

ILLUSTRATED BY
VIOLET OAKLEY

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1897

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ILLUSTRATIONS

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| She had come suddenly upon a man, sitting in a chair, with hands nervously gripping the arms <i>Frontispiece.</i> | |
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CHAPTER I.

"**I**F I could ever feel it possible to regret the departure of a gentleman from this institution, I might say now that I am very sorry indeed to have you leave us, Mr. Van Vorst."

"Thank you, warden. I may also say that if ever prisoner had reason to become attached to his jail and to his keeper, I am that prisoner."

The warden, gazing with those keen, penetrating eyes which were such able appraisers of human ware at the man whose hand he held, perceived far more in the lined and worn face than we, mere casual observers, could possibly discover.

We, strangers to the tragic events of the prisoner's career, see in him merely a man in

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the early prime of life, a gentleman unmistakably ; tall, but with a slight stoop in his shoulders that makes his height seem less than it really is ; slender of build, unnaturally white of skin, with fairly regular features, hazel eyes, intent and introspective of expression, a clean-shaven face, and short, crisp hair which nature would still have dyed nearly black, but which artificial conditions of existence have so bleached that white largely predominates over its original coloring. The chief suggestion conveyed by the face is that of mental suffering, and between the distinctly marked eyebrows are grooved two short, perpendicular lines which indicate an habitual contraction of the brow.

But the warden, for ten years Murray Van Vorst's sole friend and intimate, divined more meaning in the various features of his personality than is revealed to us.

For instance, he observed that the stoop of the shoulders was more marked than usual, and this signified to him an uncommon degree of mental depression ; he saw that the always pale complexion had lost even that faint indication of strong vitality and the virility of manhood yet in its prime which ordinarily gave at least the appearance of health to his ward ; and from this peculiar pallor he concluded that the man was unnerved and almost frightened

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by the necessity of confronting the exigencies of recovered liberty. In the dark eyes, eyes which, despite the fact that they were those of a man who had just completed a sentence of ten years' imprisonment for an offence of which it was proved beyond the shadow of doubt that he was guilty, nevertheless were straightforward and honest in expression and had never furtively evaded the gaze of others,—in these eyes he read despair, despondency, hopelessness, indecision, almost a longing to retreat before the prospect of a freedom which lacked all the essential conditions that make liberty worth the having.

Observing these various indications, and being sincerely attached to his late prisoner, the warden sought to cheer him by presenting to his consideration the few bright aspects of his case.

“You *were* that criminal, you should say, sir,” he replied to the other’s remark. “You *are* a criminal no longer. You are as guiltless to-day as I or any man you may chance to meet. You have paid off your debt ; the old account is closed, and you are at liberty to open a new one with life in any part of the world you may select. You are still a young man, strong, wealthy, with a future before you, and with the past, thank God, behind your back.”

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Murray Van Vorst returned the warden's kindly glance with a look of grim dissent.

"With the past, you mean, stalking like a black shadow by my side," he corrected. "The more brightly the sun of prosperity may chance to shine upon me, the more pronounced that shadow will become."

The warden felt the truth of the statement, but it did not harmonize with his *métier* of cheery counsellor to coincide with it.

"Not necessarily, sir," he said. "A gentleman with all your advantages of birth and fortune may make his own figure so prominent and attractive that no one will have eyes for any shadow that may lurk near him. It will be a simple matter for you to come out of the retirement in which you have so long lived and find a cordial welcome awaiting you in the world."

A brief flash of scorn shot from Van Vorst's hazel eyes. He gave a heart-sick laugh.

"Oh, for God's sake, warden, be honest!" he exclaimed. "Say what you mean in plain language. I am no longer sensitive, you know. Prison discipline, even though it be as kindly as yours, cures all that sort of thing. A thief, if he is rich and well-born, may come out from ten years' incarceration, you mean, and find sycophants of not over-scrupulous character, willing to condone his past out of consideration

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for his money. Isn't that your real meaning?"

The straightforward penetration of his glance caused the well-disposed warden to drop his eyes. Van Vorst had, indeed, voiced his idea exactly, but, so expressed, it certainly fell short of its mark, which was to comfort and encourage a failing heart.

"Well—not precisely—that is——" he stammered, miserably at a loss to make intent tally with honesty. His companion rescued him from his embarrassment by interruption.

"All right!" he broke in, gratefully; "I understand. You're a good fellow, warden, and I quite appreciate your efforts to make me feel that being set at liberty involves all sorts of joyous possibilities. It isn't your fault if I cannot respond in proper fashion. But I can't. If there were one living soul looking for my return to the world, counting upon my release, anticipating it as a means of increasing its own happiness, it might save the situation in my eyes. As it is, how is it? That sounds like one of those involved conundrums, doesn't it? Well, the analogy holds. My condition is an involved conundrum. I am a married man, and yet I have no wife, nor is my wife dead. I am a father, but I have no child, and yet my daughter is living. I am a rich man, a very rich man, even in these days when to be rich

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means to be possessed of what our grandfathers would have called fabulous wealth, and yet, God knows, a more poverty-stricken wretch does not exist to-day in all America than I am."

His eyes looked forth so haggardly from between their bent and furrowed brows, his voice was so deep and hoarse with the pent-up feelings which nearly choked him, and his face had grown so fearfully white and rigid, that a man's one idea of restoration took immediate possession of the warden. He went hastily toward a cabinet that stood in a corner of his private office, and took out a decanter and glass. He filled the latter and offered it to Van Vorst.

"Here, sir," he said, employing a casual manner at variance with his deeply stirred sympathies, "you must drink to a brighter future than that you anticipate."

Van Vorst took the glass with eager fingers and drained its contents. The stimulant was welcome to him, for no living soul could conceive, unless, indeed, it were one that had passed through similar vicissitudes, what agony of mind, what a terrible loss of will-power, what a cowardly shrinking from action, had suddenly laid hold upon him. The spirit partially braced him up, but he felt a craving for a brief reprieve before closing behind his re-

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luctant form those doors which had so long sheltered him from public notice.

"Thank you, warden," he exclaimed, and hesitated. He knew that there was nothing more to be said, that the warden had done all in his power to facilitate and render easy his departure, and that it was expected that that departure should now take place. And yet he hesitated.

It seems inconceivable that one should cling to chains which have constrained and galled one ; that one should come to desire the replacement of shackles which have cut deep and agonizing wounds into sensitive and quivering flesh ; that one should, of his own accord, cleave to an environment which his soul has loathed and his spirit spurned ; that one should feel homesick longing and regret for walls which have shut all wholesome light and warmth from his life. Yet, nevertheless, Murray Van Vorst, in that dull and gloomy prison office, a free man for the first time in ten endless years, was acutely conscious that this sickly yearning for protracted residence within that hapless asylum was the one overwhelming sentiment that possessed him, of which he was ashamed, and yet to which he felt obliged, perforce, to yield for a short time at least.

"Warden," he said, with a shamefaced smile, "let me sit here in your room a few

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minutes, will you? You need not bother about me. Go ahead and do anything you want to ; but if I may just sit here a little while I shall be much obliged to you."

Much experience had familiarized the warden with this very reluctance that Van Norst was exhibiting.

"Of course," he assented, good-naturedly, and as if the request were a most natural one. "Stay as long as you like. There is only your train to be thought of."

The other made a gesture as if dismissing so trivial a consideration.

"Another will do as well," he replied. "I am not pressed for time, you know. Indeed, I shall find some difficulty, I imagine, in disposing of that I have on hand."

At that moment some one knocked on the door. The warden's "Come in" was followed by the entrance of a turnkey.

"A lady and gentleman are here, sir, with a special permit to see No. 849," he announced. "Shall I show them in here?"

The warden nodded. The turnkey disappeared, and the warden turned to his guest.

"You can take a seat behind that desk, sir," he said. "The interview will be a short one. You will not be seen at all."

Van Vorst complied with the suggestion. The desk was high, and quite concealed him

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from observation. He had just seated himself, when the door again opened and the turn-key reappeared, ushering in the visitors to No. 849.

The warden addressed them in courteous tones, and then, expecting to hear a man's voice in reply, Van Vorst was surprised by the sweet, long-unfamiliar treble of a woman's cultivated accents.

"It is I who have come to see the prisoner, sir ; she was my seamstress, and I have always been deeply interested in her. My cousin has accompanied me simply as escort."

The voice was fresh and musical, and characterized by a charming sincerity and geniality. The lady, without doubt, was young.

"Your interest has outlived the discovery of the woman's guilt," the warden suggested.

There was a moment's pause ; then the frank tones responded,—

"I have never felt assured of her guilt, sir." The reply was accompanied by a certain gravity and decision that showed the speaker had weighed the matter seriously in her own mind and had formed her opinion deliberately.

"Perhaps you were not wholly apprised of the facts in the case," the warden suggested.

"I was closely associated with the theft," the girl replied. "It was from my dressing-table that the money was stolen."

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There was apparent astonishment in the warden's next remark.

"And yet you feel doubtful of the prisoner's guilt?" he exclaimed. "Pardon me; I have forgotten the details of the case, but I thought it was you, her mistress, who caused her arrest."

"No, not I; my mother."

Although both tone and words were filially respectful, they were marked by strong dissent and divergence from the maternal decision. Up to this moment the man who had accompanied the girl had remained silent; now he spoke.

"I imagine there was really not much doubt of her guilt, warden," he said, in the somewhat self-important manner of youth that forms conclusions for itself of so decided and hasty a character that age contemplates with astonishment a quickly framed dogmatism which experience has taught it to distrust and discard on its own account; "but my cousin refuses to allow herself to be convinced of it. She has a superb faith in her species."

Although the tone and accent were a bit consequential and superior, yet they were pleasant and attractive, and prepossessed one in favor of the speaker. Apparently he was a bright, cheery young fellow, with whom the world had wagged so well that adversity had never shaken

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his calm confidence in his own judgment. But his remark evidently somewhat nettled his companion. The melody of her utterance was not quite tuneful as she rejoined,—

“You should not say that, Stephen. I do not refuse to allow myself to be convinced ; I am not so foolish as that, I hope. I am, and always have been, open to conviction in this affair ; but Martha’s guilt must be proved by evidence which I consider unimpeachable, before I will credit it.”

“Your mother——” began the young fellow, hastily. But the girl interrupted him :

“My mother, doubtless, fully believes in her own statement that, as she paused outside the door, she heard Martha cross the floor, open and shut the drawer stealthily, and return to her seat in the next room. But I have known my mother to be mistaken many times, and never, in all my life, have I known Martha to deviate in the slightest particular from the— from fact. However, all this is beside the present business. I have a favor to ask of you, warden : it is that I may see poor Martha here and not go to her cell. I fancy she would rather die than have me witness her actual degradation.”

The warden hesitated, demurring a little at the request. His glance rested on the bit of paper, the special permit, which the turnkey

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had given him and which he held in his hand.

"Well," he returned, presently, with a yielding glance at his fair petitioner, "it is a somewhat irregular proceeding, Miss Yorke, but your permit calls for a certain relaxation of the rules. I shall have to ask you to give me your word of honor that you will in no way take advantage of the indulgence shown you."

"You have my promise. Thank you.—Steenie, may I see her alone, please? Your presence will embarrass her."

"Or hers embarrass me," the young man laughed. "I fancy, of the two, she is the more hardened individual. Criminals are not traditionally thin-skinned; eh, warden? Oh, I say, Sylvia, I beg pardon. I didn't mean to hurt your feelings, dear."

There was honest regret in his voice. Evidently, though he might be somewhat careless and consequential, Stephen Lennox would never be deliberately cruel; certainly not to his cousin, Sylvia Yorke.

"Mr. Lennox might like to go through the jail with me," the warden suggested.

"Thanks, I should. I have never seen an aviary on so large a scale," Lennox replied, with an ill-timed attempt at humor.

Probably the girl's sensitive nerves were too tense at that moment to bear even the smallest

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unnecessary strain upon them, for she turned quite hotly upon him. "When you feel like making a jest upon such sad reality as this, Stephen," she ejaculated, in a low tone of reproof, "you might choose a better audience than a gentleman whose charge you are making sport of, and a girl whose most sacred feelings you are torturing.—Now, sir," she continued, turning to the warden, "whenever you are ready."

The warden bowed. He was much impressed by his visitor. It seemed to him that he had never seen a girl who combined so many admirable feminine attributes as she. Beauty, dignity, sensibility, warm-heartedness, and great charm of manner were hers, and although obviously a darling of Fortune, for her dress and appointments indicated a free command of wealth, yet she was as frank and simple as a child. But one thing about her aroused his criticism: he thought her sensitiveness concerning her servant somewhat excessive. Still, girls are frequently prone to ardent and enthusiastic championships. Yet—her most sacred feelings! H'm! well, well—— He glanced at Lennox and moved toward the door.

"If you will follow me, sir," he said.

The young man took advantage of the warden's back being turned to make a hasty

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apology to his cousin. Grasping her hand, he pressed it hard between his own.

"Oh, Sylvia, Sylvia darling," he whispered, "you know I forgot all about that. I would die, dearest, rather than make light of that. Forgive me, dear; will you—won't you?"

The girl smiled, and the pained, reproachful look quite faded from her eyes. It was apparent that she could not long regard the young fellow harshly.

"Yes," she said. "But, Steenie, how could you forget?—Now go, quick. See, the warden is looking."

She gave his fingers a little squeeze, and turned toward a table, as if she were more interested in the books that lay upon it than in the passionate warmth that had filled Stephen's eyes. The two men disappeared, and the door closed behind them.

Meanwhile, all recollection of the other occupant of the room had been chased from the good warden's mind by fresh interests and considerations. Yet there had been enacted a little scene with a single player, a still and speechless pantomime of varied emotions and almost tragic intensity, behind that tall desk which sheltered a man who had been transformed within an hour from a mere scheduled number to an individual destined to become again a person of consequence and distinction

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in the world of finance and fashion. Murray Van Vorst, lately No. 757 upon the books of the institution which still sheltered him, and upon which he was loath to turn his back, had sat quite still during the earlier portion of the interview, listening indifferently to the conversation, but emotionally somewhat disturbed by the long-unfamiliar music of a refined female voice. He lay back in his comfortable chair with closed eyes, enjoying to the full that first suggestion of what re-entrance into the world might mean to him.

Prior to his imprisonment, far back in those dimly remembered days in which his share of action had grown in retrospect to seem but a fancied participation in an unreal romance, he had been keenly alive to the pleasures of the senses. Beauty, melody, grace, good living, art in all its manifestations, the friendship of men, the society of women, all had been part and parcel of his life. It had never occurred to him that in being freely permitted the enjoyment of all these good things he was singled out by Fortune as one of a select few from a vast crowd of less favored individuals. They were his birthright; why should he have thought their bestowal in any way exceptional, or have felt the wisdom of making the most of them while they were yet his? But he had lost them. They had slipped—no, they had been

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wrenched from his grasp. For ten years they were to him as though they had never been ; and yet not so, exactly, for their memory lingered behind to tantalize and harass those awful periods of despair when he felt but one impulse constraining him, to curse God and die.

He had been allowed (for within a couple of years after receiving his sentence he had fallen heir to great wealth, and a golden pass-key possesses magic powers over almost all circumstances) certain ameliorations of the usual prison conditions ; but, being somewhat strangely natured, the incongruity of luxury and penal servitude so revolted him that he did not choose to avail himself largely of exceptional privileges. He had preferred a complete submission to the letter and spirit of his sentence to a useless attempt to reconcile himself to it by seeking to mitigate its severity by the accretion of creature comforts.

He had believed that ten years of disuse had dulled and blunted his senses, had rendered them unappreciative of those things which formerly had ministered to them. He had not calculated upon still being possessed of the ability to derive pleasure from such sources as men of his age usually find productive of gratification. Forty years of active life could not have so robbed him of the capacity for enjoyment as had that one decade of enforced

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inertia. And yet, notwithstanding all these well-grounded and sincere convictions, the soft, melodious accents of the first feminine voice that had smitten his ears since prison doors were unlocked to him set all his soul atremble with delight that was well-nigh rapture. Long-vanished experience made to vibrate within him a chord that was set in the key of Hope, that suggested unimagined possibilities of freedom, that caused jubilantly to echo in his soul the warden's remark that he had not yet passed far beyond the meridian of life. At forty-two the sun is still high in the heavens, no chill of winter foretells decay, the vigor and powers of manhood should be at their best. At forty-two, yes ; but at eighty-two ! And that, in the despondent reaction of the next moment, Van Vorst felt to be his actual age. What concern was it to the decrepitude of an octogenarian that there were youth and beauty and female loveliness yet in the world ?

His heart sank again within him at the alertness in the young man's voice when he took up the thread of discourse. It suggested a wide gulf, which seemed to the listener impossible of abridgment, between a life exhausted of anticipation and youth teeming with possibilities. The faint flush that had crept over his face faded, and left behind it a pallor even grayer than before. Again the hazel eyes re-

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covered their wonted expression of forlorn expectancy. It was probable, judging from the lack of animation in his face, that his mind had strayed from its occupation with the affairs of these strangers and had harked back to its own grievous condition. There was no indication of interest or attention in either face or manner; both were marked by apathy and mere passive dejection. He might have slept, for any evidence he gave to the contrary. He presented a sad and moving spectacle of strong manhood and powerful ability crushed to earth beneath the overmastering weight of adverse circumstance. It was obvious that, whether or not he had deserved the stroke that had cleft his life in twain, he had suffered under it as only strong natures can suffer.

All at once, however, it was as if that comfortable chair in which he appeared to be reposing at his ease had been connected with an invisible magnetic battery, of which a mischievous hand had turned on the current. So suddenly Van Vorst started, so swift a change passed over him, that one would have thought nothing less potent than a galvanic shock could have produced so tremendous an effect. This happened at the moment when the warden, with one eye on the bit of introductory paper in his hand, addressed his interesting guest by name.

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The man sitting behind the desk, with his hands gripping the extreme ends of the chair-arms, held his breath. Yorke ! Yorke ! He had good reason to know that name. None had been more closely associated with his life. With every nerve quivering, with every sense at attention, he hung upon the edge of the seat, straining his hearing for more evidence that should either confirm or disprove the possibilities suggested. And soon it came.

The girl's reply, and the request made to her cousin, the young man's flippant reflection upon the calloused sensibilities of that class to which he, Van Vorst, had so recently belonged, passed almost unobserved, certainly unheeded, over his head. Then came the young fellow's swift apology,—“ Oh, I say, Sylvia, I beg pardon,”—and then conviction, swift and absolute.

Good God ! was it not an easy matter to link those four syllables together ? Sylvia Yorke ! There should have been others added, but he was well aware for what reason they were missing. He fell back again in his chair, and covered his face with his slender, well-bred hands, while, at intervals, long shivers shook his bowed frame. He was not ready—no, he was far from ready—for a re-entrance into the world. He had not half considered with what heart-rending difficulties that return bristled, with what sharp thorns his future course must be set.

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Sylvia Yorke ! His own heart added the missing syllables, for it had never contemplated the name dismembered from its original form, and it was a new torture to him so to consider it. Then an impulse, born of a great, a long-felt yearning, assailed him,—to look upon her, to see what manner of woman she had become, to feast his eyes upon the full development of features whose childish beauty he had known far better than his own face.

He rose softly, stealthily, as a guilty eaves-dropper might have done, and lifted his head above the top of the desk. There they stood, the trio to whose conversation he had been idly listening, little suspecting what interest it might hold for him. Their backs were turned to him, and it was an easy matter to accomplish his purpose undetected. But he trembled and shook as he stood there, so violently that it became necessary to steady himself by the support of the heavy oak desk.

The girl, as I have said, was turned from him, but her profile was in full view ; and to this and to her tall, slender young form the man's eyes clung with that greedy and tenacious gaze with which a half-starved brute contemplates that which would satisfy its gnawing hunger.

Sylvia Yorke was, without doubt, a pretty girl. There were some, indeed, like Stephen

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Lennox and a few others, who went further and called her beautiful. But these were especially interested persons, and so partial critics, whose own vision was largely responsible for that exceptional degree of beauty which they claimed to discover in a low, smooth brow, a pair of blue eyes that were capable of a variety of expressions, fair, fresh coloring, and an exceedingly sweet and tender mouth. The dark hair that was taken smoothly back from either side the pure forehead was remarkable neither for color nor luxuriance ; the eyes, candid, honest, and rather intent in their gaze, were neither abnormally large nor wonderful in hue ; the nose and other features had neither perfection of form nor regularity of design ; they were well enough, and went to the making up of just such a girl as you like to meet in your daily walks,—a fresh, breezy, wholesome young creature, sound of mind and body, but no goddess, mark you, nor, for the matter of that, any great exception to her kind in a land and an age which are producing a very excellent and commendable type of young womanhood as a characteristic of nineteenth century development.

But it would have been hard to convince Murray Van Vorst that such was the case, as he stood clinging to his vantage-point, feasting his eyes upon what seemed to him a marvel

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of rare girlish beauty. Had you, being more accustomed to the type and familiar with numerous specimens of it, offered to wager that you could show many another sample as admirable in all respects as Sylvia, I do not doubt that, under the thrall of his recently kindled amazement and adoration, Van Vorst would have backed his own opinion to the contrary with half his fortune ; which would have shown no mean confidence in Sylvia Yorke's exceptional endowments.

There was something terrible, something heart-rending, in the man's look and attitude as he stood there, never moving his eyes from the girl, who pursued her conversation quite unconscious of that absorbing scrutiny. There was so much expressed in his concentrated gaze !—such a vivid realization of the awful loss he had sustained in his ten years' exile from life and all its manifold interests and attachments ; such a consciousness of the impossibility of ever recovering that vast extent of lost ground ; such a keen comprehension of the fact that that sentence of death-in-life imposed upon him for a criminal breach of trust had further-reaching consequences than could be included in a mere fixed span of years, consequences which extended far into the future and spread their poison over the entire remainder of his life ! There was the agony of

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a newly awakened sense of all he had renounced when his prison doors closed upon him and shut him out forever from the natural affiliations of existence ; there were despair, regret, longing, tenderness, sadness unutterable, and there was, besides, another quality hard to define exactly,—an expression that seemed to convey a suggestion of fierce self-blame, of self-condemnation, you might say, for having needlessly forfeited the close and intimate companionship, for having sacrificed without gain the high and loving regard, of this fair and generous-minded young creature. The punishment of Murray Van Vorst had never so excruciated him as in that moment. If the aim and intent of that sentence of Justice, which he had within the hour fulfilled, were retribution, then in that brief interval, more than in the whole term of his imprisonment, was its purpose accomplished.

Suddenly he was recalled to a recollection of his position. The interview had ended. The two men were moving toward the door ; the girl had turned, and might easily perceive him. One instant, recklessness and long abnegation got the better of prudence, and urged that he allow himself to be discovered ; then self-discipline prevailed over indiscretion, and he fell back and dropped again into the chair behind him.



CHAPTER II.

A FEW moments passed in unbroken silence. The man was busy with his own thoughts ; the girl also. Presently the door opened and a turnkey ushered into the room a woman, at sight of whom Sylvia gave a little eager cry of welcome, moving swiftly forward with extended hands.

No. 849 was a tall, gaunt Scotswoman, angular and rugged in form and feature. Her face was thin, and the freckles upon it were as numerous as stars in the heavens upon a clear night. Her high cheek-bones protruded above the hollows they overshadowed, like mountain-ridges sheltering deep valleys. There was scarcely any curve to the almost perfectly straight line of her lips, and when these parted they disclosed large, strong teeth of a slightly yellowish cast. The upper lip was shadowed by a considerable growth of sandy hair, and a large mole upon her chin was likewise adorned with a hirsute crop. The hair was scant and

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sandy, and the thick eyebrows were so much darker as to be almost, if not quite, red.

Yet, unbeautiful and somewhat harsh though Martha Melton's face was, it was by no means repulsive or forbidding. There was a straightforwardness, a simplicity, a childlike candor in the light gray eyes, which one seldom encounters in the face of maturity, and which suggested kindness of disposition and inexperience of the world.

As Sylvia Yorke sprang forward to greet her, the old woman's face reddened, her lip trembled, and she drew back a little, clasping her hands significantly behind her. The turnkey had withdrawn, and the two women, unaware of a hidden presence, believed themselves to be the sole occupants of the room.

"I canna tak' yer han', Miss Silvie," Martha said, with a strong native accent. "Ye'll be thinkin' I'm a creeminal, an' it's no' seemly for ye to shak' han's wi' sic an one."

But the girl, with a charming, wilful gesture, stretched out her arms and unclasped the bony fingers, drawing them forward and holding them in an affectionate grasp while she spoke.

"Martha," she exclaimed, looking her companion deliberately in the eyes, with a warm, affectionate light in her own, "you know I am thinking nothing of the kind. I have always

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believed you innocent, and now I have come here for you to confirm my belief."

Her voice was grave, almost solemn, yet tender withal, and the woman she addressed again drew a little away from her, with a frightened look in her eyes that might have strengthened suspicion of her guilt. But suspicion cannot increase unless it already exists, and suspicion of Martha Melton's integrity had never been begotten in the breast of her young mistress.

"Eh, Miss Sylvie, I canna do yon," she said, with a discouraging shake of her head. "I wad hae been a free woman the day an I could."

The girl drew her toward a chair, placing one for herself close beside it. She sat down, and motioned her companion to do the same.

"Sit there, Martha," she said. "I want to talk to you a little."

The woman obeyed, but reluctantly. Sylvia continued :

"You are wrong when you think you cannot thoroughly clear yourself in my eyes, although you might not be able to do it in the sight of the law. You see, you are not the stranger to me you are to Justice. I have never believed in your guilt, and a simple denial of it is all I require to confirm my faith in your innocence.

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This denial I want you to give me now, face to face."

A purple flush crimsoned the woman's hard-favored countenance, and her eyes became suffused with tears. She had served this girl from the time when the garments her uncouth fingers had fashioned for her had been of doll-like proportions, and no one could imagine how fondly she loved her, and what such confidence and trust meant to her outraged soul in this its darkest hour.

They say that the consciousness of innocence is a staff in time of false accusation ; but it is assuredly a rather inadequate prop, liable to give way frequently beneath the heavy burden of unjust oppression which it is supposed so excellently to support. Martha Melton had put its worth to the test, and it had scarcely vindicated its reputation. Her spirit was lame and sore from the many occasions upon which it had fallen prostrate notwithstanding the fact that it had been possessed of this crutch.

She bent forward now, with her hands clasping the arms of the chair, and returned, measure for measure, the open, candid, honest look with which Sylvia was regarding her.

"Ye're no' wrang in yer joodgments, Miss Sylvie," she said, simply. "I never laid eyes on the money."

The girl nodded her head in calm accept-

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ance of a fact of which she had always felt assured.

"I knew it, Martha," she replied; then, noticing a look of perplexity on the other's face, she continued, "What is it? Something troubles you."

The woman nodded. "Ay," she answered. "I hae been sair puzzled, Miss Sylvie. I never had thocht Joostice could miscarry."

The infallibility of state institutions is a matter of sacred belief with the majority of honest, unsophisticated minds. A very serious, thoughtful expression settled over the fair young countenance on which her questioning gaze was bent. There was a short pause, and then, in a low, clear tone, Sylvia Yorke replied,—

"But I knew that it could, long ago, Martha. You know how fatally it erred in that other case."

A sudden interruption here created a diversion that was most welcome to the old Scotchwoman. Her own convictions upon the subject to which the girl alluded were of a wholly opposite nature from what Sylvia assumed them to be. It would have embarrassed her sincerity and affection to have been obliged to respond.

"What was yon?" she exclaimed, looking searchingly about the room. "Didna ye hear a noise, Miss Sylvie?"

"Yes," the girl replied. "I thought some

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one spoke my name, very softly." She listened a moment, turning her head about so as to visit every corner of the apartment with her glance. "There is no one here," she went on. "It was probably some one speaking outside,—the officials, perhaps. Time is precious, Martha, and we must make the most of it. Now, I want you to help me discover the real thief. I am sure I could do it. Money does not walk out of a drawer of its own accord. Some one stole that five hundred dollars, and I am going to find out who it is. I am determined that no one I am fond of shall ever again endure an unjust sentence, if I can help it. I shall make it my business to hunt down that thief and release you, even if it should prove to be the person I love best in all the world."

The woman she was confronting rose hastily from her seat. Her homely face was working in great agitation; her hands twitched nervously. It was obvious that she was under the spell of some strong emotion. There was even a look of affright in her eyes.

"Eh, gi' ower, noo; gi' ower, Miss Sylvie," she cried, half coaxingly, half imploringly. "It's no' fitting for a young leddy like you to fash yersel' wi' sic a maitter. Let it bide; I'm no' sae uncoomfortable here. A body maun e'en dree his weird, ye ken."

Sylvia looked up at her in surprise not un-

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mingled with scorn, as she, too, rose from her seat.

"Dree his weird!" she cried, passionately contemptuous, tossing her pretty head loftily back, while her eyes flamed with indignation and dissent. "That means succumb to his fate, doesn't it, Martha? Well, that's what a man or woman must do if no one is at hand to rescue them. That is what one man I have known has been obliged to do, because there was no one belonging to him devoted enough to stand by him and save him from rank injustice. I will never allow another human being of my acquaintance to 'dree' such a 'weird' again, if I can help it: mind that, my good Martha. Do you think I can go home to-night and sleep calmly and comfortably, knowing that you are 'dreeing' an abominable and outrageous 'weird,' as you call it, in this horrible place? Don't talk to me about your 'weirds,' Martha. The name is enough to give one the cold shivers. You shall never 'dree' any of them with my consent."

She laughed at her own simple humor, but at the same time she took the woman's rough hands in hers and leaned forward to kiss her cheek.

"Now, Martha," she continued, unconsciously mingling with the affectionate warmth of her voice a little of the authority of the

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mistress, "tell me all you know about the business. I have always felt that you suspected some one. Who was it?"

A Scottish characteristic manifested itself in the old woman's manner, as she replied. It was obvious that she could be as stubborn as her young mistress was persuasive.

"I hae nae suspecion, Miss Sylvie," she answered. "Na, I hae nane."

It is sad to be obliged to record the fact that here our otherwise admirable heroine stamped her little foot in angry impatience.

"Oh, Martha," she cried, "you are becoming contaminated by your surroundings. You used to be a truthful woman."

Martha smiled grimly and spoke soothingly.

"Noo, noo, Miss Silvie, dinna fash yersel' wi' an auld body like me," she said. "Beautiful young leddies hae ither consairns mair important. Whist! Hark, noo. Hoo's Maister Steenie, an' do you be let see him as you wull, these days?—or does the ban still bide, dearie?"

The girl's face flushed and softened. It seemed that Martha in certain matters mingled the wisdom of the serpent with the harmlessness of the dove, for it was plain that by a simple stratagem she had gained her point of evading the question.

"I am afraid the ban still bides, Martha.

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Mamma is scarcely civil to him now. But I am not a wholly obedient girl, as you know. I must and will see Steenie, and no one shall prevent it."

Her lips, delicate, tender lips though they were, settled into an expression of firm resolution. It was easy to read decision of character in the lower part of the face; but the earnest eyes showed less confidence in their own ability to confront opposition. There was a look of apprehension in their depths, a suggestion of terror in the contemplation of possible consequences.

The old woman patted her hand encouragingly.

"Aweel, aweel, my bairnie," she said, "dinna let them coom ower ye. Haud to Steenie. He's a bonnie lad; an', gin ye lo' him, houd fast till him."

The girl's fair face became rarely lovely then, as deeply stirred emotion dyed it with an exquisite blush, which stole out from under the dark hair that waved back from the low brow and spread to the tip of the chin that nestled in the fur which edged her outer garment. There was no misconstruing the nature of the emotion that provoked it, nor was it possible to mistake the expression of the softly beaming eyes, burning with the gentle but fervent radiance of passionate affection.

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“ ‘If I love him !’ ” she repeated. “ If I love Steenie, Martha ! ” She gave a low laugh. “ If I breathe, if I live, if I can see, think, feel, remember, anticipate, enjoy, appreciate anything in this whole world, then I love Steenie ! If not, if you think me a dull block-head, an empty-minded and heartless little fool, incapable of experiencing any of these emotions, then, and only then, doubt of my love for him may exist in your mind. ”

Murray Von Vorst, who had again risen from his chair, and was gazing in rapt contemplation at the charming young creature who stood palpitating and glowing with the ardor and devotion of a maiden's first passion, experienced a jealous pang as her fervent rejoinder fell upon his ear. He would have had that girlish heart as yet a blank page ; and yet to what end, since it was denied him to write his own name, even in small characters, thereon ?

The wily Scotchwoman had attained her purpose of diverting the drift of the conversation from dangerous shoals. She was not skilled in parrying direct attack, but she was more or less adroit in manœuvre. Through long association and deep attachment, she had become in a measure the confidante of the girl whom she had served from infancy ; for, numerous as were the members of Mrs. Yorke's

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establishment and extensive as was her visiting-list, neither establishment nor visiting-list furnished a sufficiency of individuals of such characteristics as were congenial to her daughter, from among whom Sylvia might select one as the special repository of her most intimate thoughts and experiences. And so it had come about that Martha Melton, the seamstress of the household, sitting in her little sewing-room off Sylvia's chamber, had come to know more of the girl's inner life, of her sorrows, joys, disappointments, emotions, apprehensions, and anticipations, than perhaps any one else in all the world.

She had grown to merge her own existence in that of her young mistress ; to make the girl's interests hers ; to share her troubles and participate vicariously in her pleasures ; to grieve when she mourned, and to rejoice when she found cause for happiness. On one point alone, influenced by a childlike faith in the omniscience and infallibility of official institutions, which had never wavered until she herself had fallen victim to an error of justice, had she been at issue with Sylvia's conclusions. But, knowing how intense and loyal, how unswerving and intolerant of contradiction, was the girl's faith in this conviction, she had wisely remained passively quiescent when the subject was uppermost, refraining from troub-

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ling her young mistress's comfortable belief by a demonstration of her own contrary opinion.

She smiled inwardly, now, as she saw how successful her lure had been. Doubt of Sylvia's love for her cousin had never found lodgement in her mind, and, indeed, it was for the very reason that she was aware how earnestly the girl would repudiate any reflection cast upon the integrity of her passion, that she had chosen such a means of beguiling her from an unwelcome topic of discussion. She knew well, from past experience, that the subject of Stephen Lennox was one upon which, with a little encouragement, Sylvia could be coaxed to dwell for a considerable period. Had she not, indeed, often secured the coveted companionship of the girl she so dearly loved by judiciously introducing questions relating to the young man?

And so, now, desirous of restraining her mistress's thoughts from wandering back to the uncomfortable subject of the real thief, for whose offence she was suffering, Martha made immediate rejoinder to the indignant ejaculation.

"Ay, ay," she said, nodding her head; "I dinna misdoot it. It's a sair peety ye canna hae yer wull. Gin Maister Steenie had money, noo——"

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Her prediction as to the possibilities which might have resulted from Lennox's possession of a fortune was destined never to be enunciated. A knock at the door indicated the expiration of the time allowed for the interview. This was immediately followed by the appearance of the warden himself, who announced that a turnkey waited without to reconduct the prisoner to her cell.

"Oh, Martha, Martha, how we have wasted our time! You have told me absolutely nothing that I wanted to know!" The visitor's face was eloquent of disappointment and chagrin. Where had the valuable moments gone? How unproductive had they been! How little had she accomplished!

The old woman smiled a smile of stern self-complacency. "Ye ken all I hae to tell ye, Miss Sylvie," she responded.

Sylvia approached with tears in her eyes, and seized the hard, toil-worn hands in hers. She pressed them lovingly between her own small fingers, which were of such different mould and hue, and again laid a kiss upon each of the hollowed cheeks, with lingering, loving compassion. As she so caressed her in full view of the chief officer of the jail that held her prisoner, a gleam of pride came into the old woman's eyes, and her gaunt figure drew itself proudly up, until one could no longer detect the

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bend of the shoulders, wrought by a habit of stooping over her sewing.

"May the Lord guide ye, my bairn," she said, with a hoarse tremble in her voice, "an' keep ye sauf an' soun'. Fare ye weel."

"It is only for a little while, Martha dear," the girl replied; and her own voice was not quite steady. "I shall come again as soon as I can, and you shall remain here only until my efforts can effect your release."

A sudden suspicion seemed at that moment to flash into the woman's mind. She detained the small hands an instant longer in her grasp, as she asked, with a keen, penetrating scrutiny of the agitated face before her,—

"Did your mither ken ye cam' hither, Miss Sylvie?"

The girl frowned and grew red. She would have preferred that Martha had not put the question to her. She was deeply mortified and wounded by her mother's relentless persecution of one who had served her long and faithfully; besides this, it was not pleasant to be obliged to acknowledge before a stranger like the warden that she was acting without her mother's consent. She hesitated somewhat, and then replied with an evasion of the direct question.

"I—I did not tell her," she stammered.

The old woman gave a comprehending nod of her homely, sandy-thatched head.

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"Aweel," she exclaimed, "I ken, I ken ! The sicht o' your bonny face has been a mighty coomfort to me, Miss Sylvie, an' I'll no' go for to deny it ; but dinna fash yersel' to coom again. I'll no' forget ye, ma certy, an' bairns had best honor their faither an' their mither, ye ken, my lamb. Dinna forget that good counsel, Miss Sylvie. 'Honor thy father an' thy mither—thy father *and* thy mither.' "

She looked keenly into the girl's face as she repeated, with strenuous emphasis, the commandment. Then, dropping the small hands abruptly, she turned to the waiting warden.

"Thank ye kindly, sir," she said. "I'm at your sairvice noo."

The warden bowed gravely. There was that in the gaunt old Scotchwoman's bearing, a sort of simple but lofty dignity, that suggested her own attitude of self-respect and appealed to the respect of others. He accompanied her courteously to the door, where he placed her in charge of the turnkey and then returned to his visitor.

"Mr. Lennox is making quite an exhaustive inspection of the jail, Miss Yorke," he said. "He desired me to ask if you would not like to join him."

The girl had sunk into a chair, and was furtively wiping the tears from her eyes. She

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shuddered at the warden's suggestion, and shook her head.

"Oh, no," she said, very softly,— "oh, no." She repeated the words almost in a whisper. As she spoke, she seemed to shrink back as from a threatened torture, "I could not, sir; I have no wish to see such places. I have dreamed of them too often."

She halted, gazing, as if in painful retrospection, at the rug in front of her.

The warden was not unaccustomed to this shrinking horror on the part of the uninitiated from scenes which long association had robbed of all repulsiveness for himself. He smiled.

"Perhaps your dreams have been worse than the reality," he remarked, pleasantly. "My prison is not half such a bad place as you imagine it, I assure you, my dear young lady. It is quite comfortable enough for felons that have offended against the laws of their country."

The girl raised her eyes suddenly to his.

"Perhaps that,—yes," she responded. "But, sir, for those who have not offended against the laws and yet are detained within your walls,—how do prison rigors affect such?"

Her blue eyes were ablaze with the challenge and reproach of one who holds the servant responsible for the master's misdeeds. Even this man, clement and kindly officer though he seemed, was, in her sight, guilty of heinous

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offence against her, simply because he was the minister of a justice that through hideous error had forfeited the right to judge.

Thinking her still swayed by an excessive and unreasonable girlish championship of her servant's fancied wrongs, the warden excused her ardor, as men are wont to condone the transgressions of youth and beauty. He preserved his good nature, and replied, indulgently and suavely,—

“There are, without doubt, cases of unjust imprisonment, my dear young lady. The law is a human institution, and, as such, is liable to err. But, I assure you, instances of the miscarriage of justice are exceedingly rare, and so infrequent that only once in a term of fifteen years' service have I felt good reason to doubt the wise conclusions of the law.”

Sylvia Yorke rose abruptly, and confronted him with glowing cheeks and defiant mien.

“Is it indeed so, sir?” she exclaimed. “Your wider experience has been less prolific than my restricted one. Allow me to tell you that, within my narrow range of opportunity, I have known two cases in which justice has become outrageous tyranny and the law an abominable oppressor of innocence.”

Now, indeed, was Sylvia Yorke beautiful. Agitation and excitement gave unusual animation to her features. Her eyes shone bril-

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liantly ; her whole frame seemed instinct with suppressed feeling. Her tall young figure was drawn to its full height, her head thrown up and a little back ; her bosom, beneath its close-fitting outer garment of delicate-toned, chin-chilla-bordered gray cloth, rose and fell, as her heart beat and throbbed under the influence of strong emotion. The purple violets nestling in the fur at her breast were no deeper in tone than the iris surrounding her dilated pupils, nor was their perfume more fragrant than the exquisite aroma of maidenliness that seemed to exhale from her presence.

The man in hiding behind the desk had much ado to restrain his admiration and yearning within the limits he had imposed upon himself. His face had grown white under the stern exercise of self-restraint, and so knitted was his forehead that the dark eyebrows would have met and joined in one unbroken line above the lids but for those two deep, perpendicular furrows that separated them. Had the warden and his guest been less occupied with themselves and with each other, they must have noticed the disjointed, suppressed whispering which issued unconsciously from the white and trembling lips.

The utterances were very broken and indistinct, and the high back of the desk muffled them, but they evinced a variety of emotions,

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and were so strange and perturbed that they might have aroused in an observer suspicions of Van Vorst's sanity.

"Sylvia! What faith, my God, what faith! —She is mine, not hers.—Trusting little soul! Poor, ignorant little child! So unsuspecting of the truth! Sylvia!—oh, Sylvia, Sylvia, Sylvia!"

These phrases seemed to be expelled from within his breast by uncontrollable feeling, at intervals. The name itself was oft repeated, as if it were dear to him and he loved to linger caressingly upon its syllables.

Meanwhile the warden had responded to the girl's eloquence with a question that obviously embarrassed her :

"The miscarriage of justice has, I presume, been proved beyond question in the cases you cite, Miss Yorke? The law has acknowledged its errors and remedied them?"

The girl's brave mien drooped somewhat. Her proud crest lost a little of its lofty defiance.

"Well, no," she stammered, "it has not been proved; and that is just why it is so horrible. There is no question as to the innocence of both the supposed culprits, and yet the law will not admit it."

The warden evidently labored hard to conceal a smile.

"No question? You surprise me," he re-

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turned, with admirable gravity. "No question in whose mind, may I ask?"

There was a brief interval of silence. Poor, impetuous Sylvia, hot and eager in enthusiasm for her cause, suddenly felt herself sore bested. In a moment, however, she rallied her convictions, and, with renewed courage born of them, replied, with her head held bravely aloft, "In mine, sir."

Then, for she was by no means without a sense of humor, she realized how absurdly deficient in convincing evidence her reply must appear to one with whom mere sentimental conclusions were scarcely liable to carry much weight. A bright, sunny smile broke over her face.

"I am afraid you will not admit that my testimony is unimpeachable," she continued; "but, nevertheless, it satisfies me. Nothing in this world but their own admission of guilt would shake my confidence in the victims in these two cases." She paused an instant, as if a sudden thought had struck her. Then she went nearer the warden, and, lowering her voice until it was only with extreme exertion of his hearing that the eavesdropper could possess himself of her speech, she said, "Sir, did you never hear of the case of a gentleman named Murray Van Vorst who was arrested and convicted on a charge of embezzlement about ten years ago? The case was a noted

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one, for he belonged to a wealthy and well-known New York family, and his arrest created a considerable sensation at the time."

For the first time since his guest's appearance the warden's mind reverted to his late prisoner. He started, and involuntarily his eyes sped toward the desk behind which he had stationed him. Ignorant of the girl's connection with Van Vorst, and uncertain as to what might be the effect of her forthcoming speech upon the man of whose presence in the room she was unaware, he felt himself horribly embarrassed, and could discover but one method of dealing with this unforeseen contingency: that was by escaping from it. Resolute, ready, and resourceful as he was to meet the requirements of his office, the good warden did not feel himself competent to handle sentimental crises.

"Yes, I remember it well," he replied, in a hasty and nervous manner, which conveyed to Sylvia the impression that she was detaining him beyond the limit of his patience. "A sad case,—a sad case. Now, my dear young lady, if you will not join your cousin in his tour——"

The girl shook her head and held out her hand to him.

"No, sir," she said. "Pray excuse me. I must apologize for having so largely encroached upon your time. If you will be so

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good as to send word to my cousin that I am ready to go, and will also allow me to await his return here, I shall be much obliged. I have to thank you for making my errand so easy and agreeable. You have been most considerate. I had dreaded it beyond words."

The warden took her outstretched hand and pressed it cordially.

"I am glad, indeed, if anything I have been able to do can soften your prejudices against these necessary asylums," he said, still with obvious haste in his manner.

He hurriedly wheeled a chair forward, at a goodly distance from the desk, toward which he threw many apprehensive glances, and invited her to occupy it.

"There are books on the table," he suggested.

"Thank you," she replied. "I prefer merely to rest here, I think."

He saw her safely seated, cast a final glance toward Van Vorst's place of hiding, bowed courteously, and retreated, inwardly congratulating himself upon his timely escape, and speculating as to what might be the result of the propinquity of the two persons whom he had left behind him. His intention was to send Lennox to her at once; but this proved more difficult of accomplishment than he had anticipated.

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Prison systems and methods had awakened the young man's interest to an unusual degree, and he was not willing to abridge so favorable an opportunity of thoroughly acquainting himself with them merely to shorten Sylvia's term of waiting; for the girl was always good-naturedly indulgent of his slow, easy-going habits, and had somewhat spoiled him as to promptitude. It was not an unusual thing for her patience to wait upon his moderation. Therefore she found her departure considerably delayed.

For a while she scarcely noted the passage of time, having many and various reflections to occupy her mind. But presently she grew weary of sitting still, with idly folded hands, and rose from her seat. She approached the table, and remained a few moments, glancing over the books which were strewn upon it. These failed to arouse any very lively interest in her, however, and she next turned her attention to the pictures that adorned the walls.

She roamed from one to another of these, and, being possessed of some knowledge of drawing and color, and having a due reverence and regard for the same, their frequent offences against a catholic taste inspired her with resentment rather than admiration, and she hastened from horror to horror until disgust began to yield to amusement. It was largely apparent

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that her kindly host was not a connoisseur in matters of art.

Her tour of the apartment brought her presently opposite the tall desk. Behind this, immediately over the chair in which Van Vorst was seated, there hung a marvellous reproduction of Millais' *Huguenot Lovers*. It occurred to her, as she passed around the desk to gain a nearer view, that she would call the attention of Steenie (who assumed to be an artist) to it on his return to the room ; that is, if he ever did return.

"How long he is !" she exclaimed aloud,—and then, "Oh !" she added, drawing back in startled surprise.

She had compassed the desk with her eyes still fixed upon the picture, and had thus come suddenly and unexpectedly upon a man, sitting in a chair, with hands nervously gripping the arms, and haggard eyes, in which there was yet a feverish look of hope and vague expectancy, turned apologetically, imploringly, up to hers.

"Oh !" she cried again, this time more in perplexity than alarm, for, like pure-souled Una, she had from experience acquired no dread of lions.

Then the man arose, slowly, a trifle unsteadily, for it required more self-control than one might imagine to keep under his emotions

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so as not to frighten her who stood, with a level, inquiring, somewhat protesting look in her clear eyes, mutely questioning his right to be there. He took a step forward and tried to speak, but, somehow, words would not come. Then he threw out his hands, with palms turned upward as if in entreaty, gazing in awful, mute anxiety at her the while. He struggled again for speech, but with no better success, for the words died away unuttered in his throat.

She, quaking inwardly at the strangeness of his conduct and the inexplicable agitation of his manner, which seemed to indicate insanity, yet stirred to profound pity by something mightily pathetic and moving in his glance and gesture, was about to turn aside in an endeavor to gain the door, when the latent forces of his yet strong manhood restored Van Vorst's lost control. He dropped his hands to his sides, and the tragic look of entreaty and despair wholly died out from his hazel eyes. His face recovered its stern composure, but its ordinary expression of rigid unexpectancy was somewhat lightened by a glimmer of anticipation. His voice, when he spoke, was firmer and clearer than her own had been.

"Sylvia," he said, very quietly and simply, "you do not remember me! I was once your father."



CHAPTER III.

CHARLOTTE PENDEXTER was standing before her mirror, criticising the finishing touches that her maid Capstick was giving her toilette.

Capstick had had a not altogether easy time of it that evening, for Mrs. Pendexter was in a frame of mind very exceptional in one of her easy-going temperament. No effort upon the maid's part seemed wholly satisfactory to the mistress, although the former could not understand how such a *chef-d'œuvre* as her skill had fashioned could fail to be content with its own perfection. But that Mrs. Pendexter was not content was obvious from the expression of dissatisfaction about her lovely mouth.

"There," she exclaimed, finally, "that will do, Capstick. You need not try any longer. The gown is not a success, for all it cost. You are not to blame : you've done as well with me under the circumstances as any one could. Just give me my rings, and you may go."

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The maid's face expressed strong dissent from her mistress's expression of disapproval.

"Why, madam," she responded, "I have never seen you more beautiful, excusing the liberty I take in saying so."

But, notwithstanding the maid's evidently sincere flattery, the fair face retained its captious, critical look of disfavor, which remained upon it some moments after Capstick had retired. And, yet, how exacting must have been a standard of beauty that was unappreciative of the reflection framed in the large oval of the silver-bordered mirror, like an exquisite miniature mounted in a costly rococo case?

The figure, not above medium height, was charmingly full in its outlines, but by no means suggestive of over-weight. The neck and arms, generously exposed to view by the fashion of the corsage, were white and rounded as those of a child. Indeed, the skin, for it accompanied hair that had been red in early youth and was even now streaked through its deeper richness of hue with locks of a ruddy tint, was, beneath the electric light which fell upon it from above, of quite a dazzling whiteness, relieved only here and there—upon either cheek, for instance, and upon the small, dainty little ears—by a faint suggestion of the healthy life-current that still gave the vitality of girlhood to Charlotte Pendexter in this her thirty-second year.

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Her eyes were a soft, velvety brown, overflowing with tenderness and sympathy for those she loved, abundant in scorn for those she condemned, hot in defence of those whose cause she espoused, and past-mistresses in the art of provoking admiration and homage if it were the desire of their owner to arouse these sentiments.

The gown which had evoked its wearer's condemnation would have seemed to a less critical observer a marvel of skill, costliness, and beauty. The fabric was velvet, of a shade of green that reflected, instead of absorbing, the rays of artificial light in which it was designed to be worn. It seemed to be made of a single piece of the goods, falling from neck to hem without visible means of constraint or seam ; and yet, in some cunning and mysterious fashion, it was made subtly to define the lovely curves and symmetrical proportions of the charming form it draped. Bordering the neck and making wondrous contrast with the white skin was an edge of dark Russian sable, and from this depended a sort of broad Vandyke collar of the velvet, embroidered with an intricate design in tiny rhinestones. The hem of the skirt was likewise edged with the fur. Huge puffs of the lustrous material, barely covering the upper portion of the arms, and powdered with small conventional flowers out-

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lined with the brilliant stones, did nominal duty as sleeves ; and a string of magnificent diamonds and emeralds, worn close about the throat, called attention to the purity and texture of its cuticle. A sparkling crescent of the same jewels scintillated upon its spring above the rich parting of her hair.

Just why a woman so formed, fashioned, and clad should have found reason to quarrel with her appearance would have perplexed many an observer beside Capstick ; but the truth was, Mrs. Pendexter this evening was entertaining a guest of rare and most exceptional distinction, the parallel of whom in certain respects she had never before received beneath her roof. She was nervous as to the impression she should make upon him.

Her dinner, the function for which she was so gorgeously arrayed, had been planned at the request of a girl of whom she was very fond, whom she pitied as an unfortunately circumstanced child of a weak and ambitious mother, and whom she admired as a plucky little soul making a brave fight against a strong tide of unworthy maternal schemes and projects.

She had known Sylvia Yorke only a few weeks,—the girl had only come out that winter,—but she had had a certain degree of acquaintance with Mrs. Yorke for many years. It was at an afternoon tea, about a month be-

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fore, that, seeking a moment's respite from the ceaseless chatter of the multitude, she had run across Sylvia, sitting quite by herself in a hidden nook of a beautiful hall-way, where discreetly arranged hangings permitted strict seclusion. Mrs. Pendexter had long since acquired a knowledge of the little cubby-hole, for the house was celebrated as one of frequent entertainment, and she on most occasions was one of its honored guests.

The girl had been presented to her before this, and Mrs. Pendexter, coming thus unexpectedly upon her, greeted her with a nonchalant little nod and smile as she drew aside the curtains and caught sight of her sitting there alone.

"You are tired of it too, Miss Yorke?" she exclaimed, brightly. "May I come in and join you, or would you rather I should go away and leave you quite by yourself?"

Then she perceived how very white and exhausted the girl looked, and before Sylvia could reply, she continued,—

"You will let me share your retreat, I am sure. Have you had any tea? Wait a moment." She dropped the portières before her, and, turning, beckoned to a servant. "Get me a cup of Russian tea and a chicken sandwich, please," she said. "Bring it to me here: I will wait for it."

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She drew back within the hangings until the man should return, pondering the while upon that spent, white look she had discovered on the young face. "Oh, these worldly mothers!" she muttered, between half-closed lips. She spoke with feeling, with bitterness even, for she herself had been the victim of a matchmaker.

"What did I hear about young Lennox? Can it be that, I wonder?—Oh, thank you; that is very nice!" She took the plate and serviette from the man's hands, smiling upon him as she did so. These little pleasant recognitions of services rendered her demonstrated one of the lovable traits of the woman's character. She was humane of nature, and admitted a certain kinship with all mankind, which withheld her from excluding even the lowliest from her consideration. Then she lifted the portière and placed the plate in the girl's lap.

"Eat and drink these," she said, in a matter-of-fact tone. "You must never neglect to fortify yourself when you take part in one of these violent assaults upon Pleasure. You can never conquer even a foothold in the citadel unless you keep the battery of your digestion in working order. Neglect to oil that frequently, and you will find yourself made easy prisoner of Wretchedness and lodged in the dungeon of Misery."

She smiled pleasantly, and then gave a little

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cry. The girl had made an effort to raise the cup to her lips, but her hand shook so violently she dared not trust it with the costly china, and so she had replaced it upon its saucer. The next moment her head fell sideways upon the cushion against which she leaned, and Mrs. Pendexter saw that she had fainted.

She was a woman of quick intuition and ready action. She despatched a man for water, and, when it came, chafed the girl's brow. She had her own vinaigrette, and applied the strong salts to the small nostrils. Before long she had restored Sylvia to herself. Then she made a suggestion to her.

"Your mother is probably going on to other houses," she said. "I am going directly home. Let me take you with me. I will drop you at your own door, or, if you will permit me, take you to my own house and make you comfortable for a little while, until you are quite yourself again : may I?"

Sylvia looked gratefully into the soft brown eyes, and nodded feebly.

"Oh, if you will," she whispered, in evident relief.

It was borne in upon Mrs. Pendexter's mind that the girl did not covet her mother's society just then. Her card-case was pocket-book as well. She slipped a bill into the footman's hand, enjoining secrecy as to Miss Yorke's

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fainting, and bade him find Mrs. Yorke and tell her that her daughter had succumbed to a severe headache and that Mrs. Pendexter had assumed charge of her and had taken her home. She was well aware that the lustre of her name would blind Mrs. Yorke to the abduction she had committed.

The Henry Pendexters were two or three rounds in advance of the Yorkes upon the social ladder. Cynthia Yorke would find it easy to pardon any liberty on Mrs. Pendexter's part which would secure to herself a more intimate relationship with that lady, even if that relationship were only gained by proxy and bore small personal result to herself.

The fresh air restored Sylvia to such a degree that when the victoria drew up before Mrs. Pendexter's house the girl felt quite herself again, physically. Charlotte insisted, however, upon coddling and making much of her, and, so rapidly do female intimacies increase and strengthen, by the time she had removed her guest's wraps, established her upon a luxurious lounge in front of a bright fire, and administered to her a draught of orange-flower water, Sylvia had come to feel as if she had known her hostess all her life.

It was no difficult matter for the elder woman to secure the girl's confidence. Two hours had not elapsed since Sylvia had undergone

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the most dramatic and soul-stirring experience of her life ; its spell still possessed her, heart and brain ; her mind was filled with one subject, one image. It was easy enough to lead her on to disclose what it was that had caused the overthrow of her physical equilibrium.

“Think how terrible it is, Mrs. Pendexter,” she exclaimed, her voice thrilling and breaking pathetically, as she concluded her recital, “for a child not to recognize her own father ! To stand like a stranger before him, shy, tongue-tied, embarrassed beyond the power even of greeting him ! Why, when he said that to me, ‘Sylvia, do you not remember me ? I was once your father !’ I should have rushed forward and thrown my arms about his neck and cried, ‘Do not say you *were*, say you *are*, you have ever been, you always will be, my father, my dear, dear father, whom I have never ceased to love and believe in, in spite of everything !’ Instead of that, what did I do when he made that heart-broken appeal to me ? I drew back, and uttered a little cry of fright ; and he must have thought I shrank from and wished to avoid him, for, oh, Mrs. Pendexter, such a look came into his eyes ! And just then the door opened, and Mr. Lennox and the warden entered the room, and, before I could recover myself to address him, my father had bowed to us all, muttered some words of farewell to the

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warden, and left the room. As he went out, my cousin turned to the warden. I was so dazed that I stood there speechless and half conscious, but I remember hearing Steenie say, 'Who was that, warden?' and the warden replied, looking at me, instead of at Steenie, while he spoke, 'That's a man who has been in my care for ten years,—whose case is the only one which has ever aroused in my mind a doubt as to the competent finding of a jury. That is Murray Van Vorst.' There was no need for Steenie to make that warning gesture to the warden. I had known it all before. But I made no sign that I comprehended anything. I left the prison without alluding to the matter in any way, and I think, even now, my cousin does not know whether I heard the warden's words or not. I could not talk about it then, even to Steenie. My mother did not know that I had gone to see Martha, and I could not urge my meeting with my father as an excuse for not keeping my engagement with her. I would have given a good deal to stay at home this afternoon with my own thoughts, but mamma would not have allowed me to do so without a good reason. And so, you see, I had to come, although I felt so desperately unable to."

This had happened a month before, and in the interval a warm intimacy had sprung up between the woman and the girl. Charlotte

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Pendexter's position as Sylvia's confidante was a rather delicate one. Like all the world, she had been interested in the Van Vorst scandal at the time of its occurrence, and, though personally unacquainted with the malefactor, she had been shocked and distressed at the idea of a gentleman, a member of her own order (for the Van Vorsts outranked the Yorkes, and Murray Van Vorst had stepped down a couple of rounds on the social ladder to join hands with the woman he had married), being transformed into a felon. In common with public opinion generally, she had taken for granted the prisoner's guilt. The facts in the case seemed conclusive evidence, and it was easy enough to see how the thing had come about. Given certain *dramatis personæ*, suitable conditions, an assumed weakness of character in the chief actor, and it is not difficult to work up a very pretty little domestic tragedy.

There had been the hero, Murray Van Vorst, possessed of a moderate income (the Van Vorst millions had not then come into his hands); his wife, an ambitious and exacting woman, swayed by a desire to rival those queens of society whose monthly expenditures cast into insignificance such annual income as she could command; his rich but parsimonious father-in-law, whose affairs were largely managed by Van Vorst himself; an accumulation

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of debts ; a period of financial depression, which rendered the money-market tight and money-lenders wary ; an establishment run on a scale beyond its owner's means : it was scarcely to be expected that with this evidence before them, together with the spurious checks made payable to Van Vorst and bearing his endorsements, drawn in old Samuel Yorke's name and repudiated by him as forgeries, a jury should hold the son-in-law innocent.

All this was running through Charlotte Pendexter's mind as she descended the staircase, entered her dining-room, and made a final survey of the exquisitely appointed table that stood ready for her guests.

Carping and discontented as she had been with the results of Capstick's efforts, she could but applaud those of Maule, her chief butler. There was nothing to be altered, nothing to be suggested in either arrangement or decoration. It was worth paying the man his price to secure such artistic service as his. She made the tour of the table, the discreet and valuable servant following a few steps behind, with a look of anxiety in his watchful eyes. He knew his mistress to be well qualified to pass judgment upon the results of his handiwork, and, from the minuteness of her instructions, he felt that to-night, for some reason, she would be hyper-critical.



"Heavily perfumed flowers breed powerful associations in some minds."

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The table, a round one (as a widow she preferred this shape, which obviated the necessity of choosing a *vis-à-vis* to occupy the place of host), was laid for eight only, and it did not take long to compass its circuit. Maule noticed that the look of gratification upon his mistress's face increased, until she reached the seat upon the left of her own. Here she paused and knit her brow, gazing thoughtfully at that particular cover. His heart began to throb apprehensively: what had she discovered out of harmony with the general scheme? After a brief silent contemplation, she turned to him.

"I think, after all, I will have the violet boutonnières changed. Take them off, Maule, please, and have some white chrysanthemums brought in. Heavily perfumed flowers breed powerful associations in some minds," she continued, as if to herself, while Maule moved about noiselessly, removing the discarded violets; "and to-night we must avoid anything that may breed retrospection.—You have done very well indeed, Maule," she observed, again addressing the butler. "I am quite satisfied."

Once more she cast a general look of survey over the table, and then moved toward the door. Here she turned, and glanced back to see what impression a *coup d'œil* would produce.

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"I wonder what he will think of it," she murmured. "After ten years of prison life, I wonder how a return to comfort and luxury affects him—I wonder!"

It was a considerable concession to her friendship for Sylvia that she was making this evening. She had the reputation of being a conservative and generally exclusive woman, although those who shared her predilections for a somewhat guarded attitude toward the world were wont to animadvert at times upon her quixotism and unconventionality, the truth being that there was a strain of originality and audacity running through her blood which influenced her occasionally to indulge in an unexpected independence of judgment and liberty of action.

To-night, however, she was aware that she had been unusually daring, and a less courageous woman would have been decidedly nervous in contemplating the possible consequences of an undoubtedly rash and audacious step. She had invited to her house, as her chief guest of honor, to meet persons of the highest social standing and the most influential character, a recently discharged convict, a man on whom she had never set eyes, and who might be, for all she knew to the contrary (for her doubts of his guilt had only been aroused, not really strengthened into disbelief, by Sylvia's filial

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faith and unswerving confidence), as dastardly a scoundrel as ever ran unhung. She shrugged her charming shoulders, and wondered inwardly if indeed she had not been a weak fool to make this attempt to re-establish a gentleman felon on a lofty social plane, through sympathy with a sorely distressed and tender-hearted daughter, who craved opportunities for meeting a father whom she was forbidden to receive upon the natural territory of her mother's hearthstone.

It had been a feat not altogether easy of accomplishment, this that she had undertaken. Small as her dinner-list was, it is doubtful if the composition of any that she had ever made out had caused her so much thought and consideration. And yet it had been necessary for her to select but four guests, as half the octette was a matter of course. Sylvia and herself, Van Vorst and Lennox, had formed the original nucleus of the occasion ; it was only to select a corresponding number to round out the table. But these ! It was a simple matter to choose four leaders of special coteries from among her distinguished acquaintance, but a more difficult business to coax persons of such distinction to meet upon equal terms a man but recently discharged from penal servitude.

Possibly no woman in all New York could have succeeded in such an undertaking as

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Charlotte Pendexter had been able to do. She had gone to the very fountain-head of society, convinced that to turn the tap of favor there in Van Vorst's direction would be to set running a current of crystal water that should cleanse his reputation from all stains in the eyes of the world.

To General Mede, autocrat and dictator, her own uncle, and to Alicia, his wife, philanthropist *à la mode de grande dame*, she had made her first application. The general, well aware of the responsibility devolving upon his nod (it was said of him that he could bow any man, whosoever he might be, into society), at first absolutely refused to meet the *ci-devant* criminal. But Charlotte had what is vulgarly denominated "a pull" over him, and the old war-horse felt constrained to mind the curb of her small hands. The fact was, the general's means were ill proportioned to his worldly status, and, being a bit of a plunger and addicted to Marginal Indiscretion (a contagious disease bred from the gambling germ, for which the only cure is a smarting and most uncomfortable irritant called Absolute Ruin), he had found it convenient upon occasions to seek relief from the effects of his ailment at the hands of his fair and wealthy young niece, who was wont to apply to his dolorous condition a soothing balm called Temporary Loans. And so it was that, after certain arguments had

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been adduced by his gentle physician in furtherance of her request, the old Kaiser of club and drawing-room yielded at discretion.

This was an example of a case in which the first step alone counted. The presence and countenance of General Mede once assured her function, Charlotte found it quite an easy matter to secure the acceptance of her Aunt Alicia, who as one of a committee of a very swell society for the Relief and Reformation of Discharged Criminals, could not consistently refuse to accord what encouragement her mere countenance might afford "one of those very sad and unfortunate creatures, you know, my dear, and quite a gentleman, I give you my word" (thus she afterward expressed herself to a near friend), in whose behalf the R. and R. Society had been organized. Having gained over two such important representatives of leading factions, the young widow felt the rest of her task greatly simplified. Angela Brooke, whose smile or frown gave the cue to a large following of the ultra-fashionable world, and Urquhart Dupee, whose opinion governed a younger and more rapid set of men than that over which the general's influence extended, had lent themselves to her scheme for the rehabilitation of Murray Van Vorst, with that easy *laissez-aller* and good nature which is a characteristic of their especial caste.

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"Oh, the poor dear!" Angie Brooke had cried, effusively, when Charlotte, whom she somewhat feared as well as admired, advanced her invitation. "Of course we must set him up again, Charley. He is so awfully good to look at, don't you think? And so desperately sad, too, don't you know! Reminds you of Edgar in Lucia, or Kendal in The Iron-Master, or—er—er—one of Ouida's men, Chandos, or Strathmore, or one of those. It's an awfully shocking thing, of course, to have spent ten years in prison, don't you know, but I saw him the other night having dinner at Muset's, and I didn't see but his manners were as good as any one's."

Dupee gave a prolonged whistle when Mrs. Pendexter accosted him upon the subject, apologizing, of course, an instant afterward for such a lapse of breeding.

"But—to reinstate a forger!" he exclaimed. "A labor of Hercules, indeed! It goes without saying that I am at your service, Mrs. Pendexter. I shall never forget your good offices in patching up that row between old Latimer and me. Lord! I might have had Theo Latimer loaded upon me if it hadn't been for you! You'd better believe I've fought shy of wedded charmers since then. Let's see—he has all the Van Vorst millions at his back. I don't believe you'll have such hard

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work, after all. And, by Jove! a fellow ought to be rather applauded than condemned for forcing open the grip of such a skinflint as old man Yorke."

And so Mrs. Pendexter had gained every point thus far in her enterprising scheme. It remained to be seen what results would be forthcoming from it. She entered her drawing-room, which was beautiful and attractive as are the apartments of nineteenth-century women of culture and wealth, and seated herself in a low chair, running over in her mind the order in which she had placed her guests at table. She laughed softly, a little amused chuckle, as she considered how aghast Cynthia Yorke would be had she a suspicion of who were to be two of the guests that her daughter would meet that night,—a father defunct in law, and a lover nullified as such by the maternal edict.

Even as she smiled thus, the door opened, and Sylvia presented herself, unannounced. She came forward with a little anxious look in her eyes.

"He hasn't come yet, Charlotte?" she asked, with breathless haste, even before greeting her hostess.

The latter shook her head, smiling in mingled encouragement and reproof.

"No, of course not. You are shockingly early for eight o'clock dinner. Only half after

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seven now. And you are white as a sheet, child, and shaking like a leaf. Come, come, this is too foolish : you will disgrace me before my guests. They are persons of consequence, if you please, unaccustomed to being asked to meet unsophisticated children who have not yet learned the art of self-control."

The girl made a desperate effort and steadied herself a bit.

"Oh, Charlotte," she groaned, "what if he shouldn't like me ! I don't think I'm looking my best to-night ; and yet I've been walking all afternoon, trying to get some color into my cheeks !"

The deep anxiety of her expression had its comic as well as its pathetic side. Charlotte Pendexter pretended to see only the former aspect. Her clear laugh rang out upon the air as she replied, but at the same time she was in deep sympathy with the girl's solicitude, though, scanning her young guest's appearance with the eye of a connoisseur, she felt that it had little cause to exist. Sylvia was certainly a vision of fair and tender loveliness.

"You vain little cat !" she exclaimed, "Handsome is as handsome does. Behave yourself, and your looks will be all right. That gown is very fetching : a present from grand-papa ?"

Sylvia nodded.

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"Yes," she replied, still with an anxious look in her eyes. "I thought it pretty too, at first, but now I've grown dissatisfied with it. You are so gorgeous, Charlotte! I never saw anything so beautiful as you are to-night."

The elder woman turned the compliment aside with a question. She cared little for the flattery of speech.

"How is your grandfather, Sylvia?" she asked. "I heard the other day that he was failing: is it so?"

"Yes," the girl answered, gravely. "He was much distressed and disturbed at the time my money was stolen. Oh, not on account of the money: do not think that, Charlotte," she entreated, earnestly, seeing a look of contempt in her hostess's brown eyes. "I know that people consider grandpapa close, but he has never been so to me. Perhaps he is to mamma, and I'm afraid she makes known the fact; but, Charlotte,"—she spoke more slowly, evidently choosing her words with care,— "mamma is really extravagant, and grandpapa needs to hold a rather tight rein upon her. With me he is very different: he never refuses anything I ask. That five hundred dollars was a gift from him, quite unsolicited by me. I am sure it was not the mere loss of the money that disturbed him so, for it had already passed out of his hands; and why

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should he have been distressed because I had lost instead of spent it?"

"H'm—well, I don't know. Do you really think the incident had any direct bearing on his illness?"

She asked the question, not because she was especially interested in the physical condition of old Samuel Yorke, but because she was solicitous to keep his granddaughter's attention diverted from the ordeal that was imminent. The subject of the mysterious theft she knew to be one that closely engaged the girl's mind, for she was aware of Sylvia's determination to effect her old servant's release from what she considered false imprisonment. Sylvia's reply was vigorously emphatic.

"Yes; I am sure it had," she said. "Oh, Charlotte, you cannot imagine what a scene we had that awful day! Grandpapa had given me the money that morning,—I think because he had heard me tell mamma I needed some new furs and she had been quite impatient with me, saying that she did not know where I would get them, as she certainly had no money to give me. I put the money in a drawer in my dressing-table, and went down to luncheon. There was no doubt of my putting it there, for both mamma and Martha saw me do it, as they were in the room at the time. Martha was fitting to mamma some under-waists that she

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was making her. They were not quite through when the luncheon-gong sounded, and mamma told me to go down and say to grandpapa she would come immediately. She did come very soon after, and while we were having luncheon, Jaynes, the butler, brought in a package which had come C.O.D. by express. Grandpapa wished to pay for it, but the amount was something under fifteen dollars, and he had nothing less than a twenty-dollar bill. I offered to change this for him, and went up-stairs for the money. The whole amount had gone! I thought I must have been mistaken in believing I had put it in the drawer: so I went into the next room, which is the sewing-room, and asked Martha if she remembered seeing me place it there. She said yes, but did not seem much interested in the matter and did not offer to help me search for it. Finally I was obliged to go down and tell mamma and grandpapa that I could not find it. At first grandpapa didn't seem to take it in. I thought him chiefly concerned about the expressman. He turned to mamma very quietly, saying, 'Perhaps you, Cynthia, can favor me with the amount,' or something of that kind. He had evidently forgotten mamma's statement that she was quite strapped; but she reminded him of it. And then, Charlotte, the tempest broke.

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He flew into an awful passion, and said such strange, incomprehensible things——”

“Such as what?” Charlotte was beginning to feel interested.

“Oh, I don’t remember. They didn’t impress me at all, because they seemed just the ravings of insanity; besides, I didn’t hear much, for mamma bade me leave the room. Poor thing! I hated to leave her alone with him, for she looked frightened to death; and I didn’t wonder. You have no idea, Charlotte, how terrible it is when grandpapa loses control of himself.”

“What do you think caused his anger, if not the loss of the money?”

“I don’t know, I’m sure. At first I thought he believed mamma had borrowed it of me; that was what I gathered from what he said to her. But that showed how unreasonable he was, for of course if I had lent it to her I should have said so at once; although it would have made him angry, for he has forbidden mamma to borrow from me.”

“Is your mother in the habit of borrowing from you?” Charlotte asked. Her interest in the case was growing.

Sylvia dropped her eyes and fidgeted with the Irish point cover that draped the small table beside her. She had unintentionally betrayed a fact which voluntarily she would not have disclosed.

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"Well, she has done so, on occasions," she admitted, reluctantly. Then, as if in excuse, she continued quickly, "Mamma has absolutely no idea of the value of money. She has never a cent in her purse, and really, Charlotte, it is not niggardliness that makes grandpapa so particular with her. It is necessary for some one to keep her within bounds. It seems, perhaps, disloyal in me to say so, but it is only justice to grandpapa to acknowledge it."

Mrs. Pendexter nodded.

"Oh, it's a common enough fault among women," she said. "The extravagance of our sex is so traditional a characteristic that it seems almost unfeminine not to be possessed of it. What brought your grandfather round finally?"

Sylvia did not respond at once. She sat quite still, gazing in apparent thoughtfulness at the small diamond buckles upon her hostess's satin slippers.

"Well," she returned presently, "I don't think he has ever quite come round, as you call it, Charlotte. He was taken very ill after that, and keeps his own rooms, seeing no one but Turbot, his valet. He continues to harbor some grudge against poor mamma, I think, for he will not have her come near him, and it is only during the last week that he has admitted me. He really looks awfully ill, and I feel

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most anxious about him, for I am very fond of grandpapa, Charlotte, in spite of everything."

Just what this widely comprehensive obstacle to her affection might comprise Mrs. Pendexter had no opportunity of asking; for at that moment the door opened and Maule announced,—

"Mr. Van Vorst."

Mrs. Pendexter rose immediately and advanced toward the door, dropping a reassuring word to Sylvia as she passed her. She noticed with much commiseration that there was not a vestige of color in the girl's face, and that her hands were twitching nervously in her lap. She felt deeply for the poor child's perturbation, which, in a measure, she shared, for this situation in which she had voluntarily placed herself had no precedent in her experience. However, her exquisite self-possession permitted no evidence of embarrassment to escape her, as, with cordially extended hand and a charming smile of welcome lighting her dark eyes, she moved graciously forward to greet her guest.

"Thank you for yielding to my request and coming a little early," she said, after the usual preliminary salutations had been exchanged. "You are affording me a rare and unusual pleasure to-night, Mr. Van Vorst. I thank

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you for allowing me the privilege of introducing you to your daughter."

Van Vorst looked down upon her with a visible softening of the iron constraint of his features.

"My indebtedness to you is too great for expression," he returned, simply. "I could not have anticipated such consideration from a stranger."

"For Sylvia's sake I ventured to solicit you," she remarked.

He gazed at her a moment in silence, as if reading her countenance to discover whether anything but genuine disinterestedness lay behind its apparent sincerity.

"Ah, yes. Of course ; I quite understand it was for Sylvia's sake. Has she come ?" he then asked, seeming to put himself as an object of consideration wholly aside.

Mrs. Pendexter made a backward motion with her head.

"Yes," she replied ; "she is there.—Sylvia !"

And then she murmured a word of excuse and glided from the room, leaving Sylvia Yorke to make acquaintance with the father between whom and herself lay the broad gulf of ten years' separation. Her mind dwelt upon the personality of her guest as she sat in a little anteroom awaiting the arrival of the rest ; and

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this was not strange, for there was an unlikeness to other men about Murray Van Vorst, born of exceptional experience, which was wont to attract and rivet the interest of such as came in contact with him.

"A handsome man," she concluded. "Decidedly presentable, and with nothing in his manner or appearance to suggest his late residence." She breathed a sigh of relief. This was one point in her favor. "I wonder if that child's intuitions may not be right, after all," she rambled on. "There was not the look of an actual felon in the man's face. That was a curious little history of Sylvia's—old Yorke's unwarrantable rage, and the rest of it. Could it be possible for a man to allow himself to be convicted of a crime he never committed? Ten years of prison hardships and isolation to an innocent man. Father in heaven! no one could voluntarily condemn himself to that! And yet—it is hard to associate guilt with such a face as his. What an unutterably sad face it is! How he looked as he repeated my words, 'For Sylvia's sake'! It was as if he never dreamed of consideration being shown him for his own. Ah! the door-bell."

Motioning to Maule to wait a moment before answering the summons, she crossed the hall and re-entered the drawing-room. The two whom she had left there were standing beside

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the little table by which Sylvia had been sitting. The father's arms were about the girl, and her sweet face, all wet with tears, but smiling and infinitely happy, lay upon his breast.

At Charlotte's appearance Van Vorst withdrew his arms from Sylvia, and turned toward his hostess with a countenance so changed by joy, so inspired by a new hope, so illumined by recovered anticipation, that her soul stirred within her at the thought that she had been the instrument which had so quickened and animated these long-dormant emotions. As he took her hand in his and bowed in reverent gratitude above it, it seemed difficult for him to find fitting word or accent in which to address her. In all his life he had never been so profoundly moved toward another as he was at that moment toward this stranger who had brought within his reach the one thing in the world his heart coveted. His eyes were very dark with suppressed feeling, but glad withal, and his compressed lips twitched with the weight of a burden of indebtedness of which they found it hard to relieve themselves.

But intruders were imminent, and the woman he so passionately desired to thank was standing with her hand in his, awaiting his words. The compassion and sympathy in her look made still more difficult the exercise of his self-control. The door opened, and he hurriedly

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bent his head until it almost touched the delicate pink ear his voice accosted :

“Of all the actions set forth in the Bible, the one which most strongly appeals to our hearts is the salvation of the stricken wayfarer by the good Samaritan. Occasionally similar actions are performed in these days. I thank God that I have fallen in the path of a good Samaritan.”

That was all he said in words, but the expression of his eyes added volumes thereto. If her dinner had passed off less perfectly than it did, Charlotte Pendexter would have felt no regret in having undertaken it. The function had been wholly justified in her sight.







CHAPTER IV.

IT was on the 20th of February that Mrs. Pendexter gave her dinner in honor of Murray Van Vorst. On the afternoon of the 14th of April, nearly two months later, she was sitting in her chamber before her private desk, scrutinizing two notes that had come to her by the same post, and comparing with some amusement their characters.

"Letter for letter they are alike," she said, — "letter for letter. It is curious ; a plain case of heredity, for the child could not have acquired such exact similarity by imitation. She was separated from him at the time she must have been forming her hand."

She raised the two sheets of paper, and scanned them curiously as she leaned back in her chair. One was a note from Sylvia, whom she seldom saw of late, Mrs. Yorke having forbidden her daughter's visits to Charlotte since discovering how dangerously they menaced her own plans and purposes. It was short and hurried, and she went through it quickly.

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"DARLING CHARLOTTE" (it ran),—

"I am so wretched. I have not seen any of your dear people, neither you, nor papa, nor Steenie, for days and days. Grandpapa is dying, they say, and the house is awfully gloomy. He still does not allow mamma to enter his room, and she is so irritable and nervous there is no pleasing her. I can do nothing about poor Martha, and I have such heart-broken letters from Steenie. This is to ask you to have the poor boy at your dear house and comfort him all you can.

"Your miserable

"SYLVIA.

"P.S. Mamma has a horrid man here constantly. You know him; he is an Englishman, with a prospective title, mamma says. She is trying to force him down my throat; but I can at least keep my mouth shut, and he can scarcely marry me if I do not open my lips to give my consent, can he?"

The other note, from Murray Van Vorst, was even shorter:

"DEAR MRS. PENDEXTER,—

"If you are disengaged to-morrow afternoon at half-past five, will you see me a few moments?"

"Yours faithfully,

"MURRAY VAN VORST."

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She laid down the two sheets, and glanced at the clock on the mantel.

"He will be here in five minutes," she murmured, and rose, going to her dressing-table, before which she stood, arranging minute details of what appeared already a finished toilette. She started like one caught in a flagrant offence when, presently, Maule knocked ; and as he announced Mr. Van Vorst, the quick color of a blushing school-girl flushed her delicate skin.

"I will be down directly," she said, without turning her head, for she was solicitous lest the apparent consciousness of her look should betray her. "And, Maule, I am not at home to other visitors this afternoon," she added, still assuming to be occupied with some object upon the table before her.

She dallied a little after the man departed, fidgeting without apparent purpose about the room, straightening here a table-cover, there a bit of drapery, replacing a chair that had been drawn from its usual position, and taking up and laying down again various ornaments upon the mantel and desk, in the aimless, absent-minded fashion of one who seeks merely to gain time. Finally, she cast a last glance at the mirror, mechanically smoothed the already smooth hair above her small ears, and then, still with that girlish blush on her face, trailed

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out of the room and across the hall-way until she gained the broad staircase. At the top of this she halted again ; then, rallying herself upon her irresolution, she took her courage in both hands and deliberately placed it upon her timorous heart, descending the staircase with a firm, swift step that no longer faltered until it had brought her to her destination.

Her footfall made so little noise in its passage that she perceived her guest before he took note of her coming. He was leaning against the chimney-piece, gazing intently into the heart of the burning logs. A gentle light came into her eyes as they fell upon him ; soft, brooding pity, earnest wistfulness, deep sympathy and regret, filled them with indescribable tenderness and longing as they dwelt solicitously upon his preoccupation. For the expression of Van Vorst's face, caught thus unawares, was one of haggard wretchedness and dejection. Ordinarily he was on guard to conceal all such indications, for he was a proud man, and it would have but increased the discomfort of his position to let others suspect how extreme it was. Now, however, believing himself alone, his visor was up, and the abject despondency of his spirit spoke loudly from his attitude, from the downward curves of his face, and from those perpendicular lines between the brows.

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She stood for a moment in plain view, had he happened to glance up, and watched him. Then, letting the mask of mere conventional interest drop over the special emotion in her countenance, she moved forward and addressed him as a woman greets an ordinary acquaintance.

He made no pretence of introducing his errand by commonplace preliminary phrases irrelevant to it, but plunged at once *in medias res*, stating boldly, without circumlocution, the reason which had brought him thither by special appointment.

"I am come to thank you—" he began, and then interjected with a gruff sound that could scarcely be called a laugh, so hollow was it, "Good God! to thank you!—as if I could ever even begin to express gratitude for such kindness as you have shown me! To acknowledge, let me say, an appreciation which I cannot put in words, of what you have tried to do for me,—and to bid you good-by."

He had held out his hand to her in greeting, but the words that accompanied the gesture restrained her from responding to it. Vaguely the idea suggested itself to her that to place her hand in his would be to acquiesce in the separation his speech proclaimed to be imminent. Her eyes grew large and apprehensive, and the delicate pink in her cheeks, that had

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given her so girlish an appearance, whitened out to the significant pallor of a sorely stricken woman.

"Good-by?—good-by?" she questioned, stammering a little over the reiteration. "Good-by for what?—for how long?"

Van Vorst turned from her to the fire. The unmistakable emotion in her face was breeding in his unwilling mind a suspicion which would long since have been begotten in the breast of a vainer man. Was it possible that all that wonderful kindness and consideration which she had shown him since his liberation had been instigated by a less impersonal motive than that of a far-reaching and almost divine charity? The thought, merely in its passage through his mind, shook his very soul. For an instant, gazing silently into the fire, he cherished it, then put it resolutely from him, as an honest man flouts temptation, and replied to her in an even, tranquil voice.

"I am going away, Mrs. Pendexter," he said. "I am going to beat a cowardly retreat. There is no use in my trying to face life here in New York, where every street Arab knows my history and every crook has a right to look upon me as a pal. I've tried to put the past behind me and assume that my punishment has wiped out my—the offence which stands against my name; but it is useless. The fact

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of my imprisonment glares me in the face at every turn."

He had tried to make his speech unemotional, for he had no wish to provoke her sympathy further, but the bitterness of his experience would escape in accent and intonation.

"The decision is a sudden one." The words were uttered in a very low tone, as if the speaker's vocal strength were scarcely at her full command.

"Not very. It has been forming itself from the outset."

"You have made many friends since——"

He relieved her of the awkwardness of concluding the sentence.

"Friends, no ; acquaintances, yes. Mrs. Pendexter, my old friends, who might have done much for me, have not rallied about me. I do not blame them, not in the least, but their unanimous defection has been rather—well, trying. My new acquaintances, those with which your goodness has supplied me, tolerate me, but their quality does not satisfy my requirements. It is plain to me that, shorn of my money and your—patronage" (this with a swift smile that had no bitterness in it ; he rejoiced in his obligations to her), "they would fall away and leave me stranded and desolate." He broke off abruptly, and turned his gaze upon the fire ; then he wheeled suddenly around

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again toward her, speaking rapidly and to the point. "Mrs. Pendexter, since my return to New York not a man has ever invited me inside his club, much less offered to put my name up for membership. Are you aware how plainly that omission marks my social status?"

She made no reply, only drew in her breath sharply and dropped her eyes to the floor. Van Vorst, man-like, had by this time forgotten his determination to spare her, in the selfish comfort of pouring out his soul to one who was so deeply interested in his troubles.

"Great heavens!" he went on, squaring his back against the mantel and facing her directly, "if you could know the sort of creature that condones my past for the sake of the money he may induce me to squander! It is a creature that a woman thinks a man, and cultivates and makes much of, but that his own sex knows to be a cad, a worse than villain, a sort that no gentleman, even if felony had robbed him of the title, would consort with, although he had no other acquaintance on all God's earth. It is from such as these, Mrs. Pendexter, I fly."

"And you go—where?"

He took a coin from his pocket.

"Heads or tails," he said; "Europe or Asia," and flipped it into the air, glancing at it as it fell again into his open palm. "Tails

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—Asia, then," he continued. "What is it that fellow in Tennyson says, 'I shall take some dusky woman, she shall rear my savage race'? I *could* do it, you know. I am free to marry if I wish. Perhaps in uncivilized countries the crime that has made me an outcast here may be considered the virtue of a hero."

She appeared not to be listening to his last words. The expression of her face showed her thoughts to be introspective. But the flippant syllables had made some aural impression, for she repeated a portion of them as she rose from the seat she had taken, and came forward. She was quite close and immediately in front of him when she finally spoke, not impetuously as if carried away by impulse, but seriously and with grave weight and emphasis.

"The crime which has unjustly made you an outcast has, even in this land, made you a hero in some eyes," she said, gazing steadily at him, with her beautiful head raised as a queen might lift hers when bestowing a meed of honor upon a victor.

A sharp thrill seemed to go through the man on whom her shining glance rested. His face grew as white as her own, and he bent a little forward, accosting her hoarsely in a voice unlike his own.

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"What—what do you mean?" he asked, breathlessly.

She raised her head higher yet, and her proud, sweet smile gave rare beauty to her face.

"I mean," she replied, speaking the words as if they had long been a precious, unique possession of her own, and she regretted parting with them, "I mean that no one who knows you truly, Murray Van Vorst, knows you as I have come to know you, could believe you capable of committing a felony. Such would feel assured, as I do, that you have sacrificed yourself to shield another."

They stood speechless a moment, looking intently into each other's eyes. In those of the woman there was love beyond disguising, and a tender satisfaction in her own courage. In those of the man there was the assurance her heart coveted, besides the grateful appreciation of an ill-treated hound that has received an unlooked-for caress. There was in them, also, the proud consciousness of integrity, for the first time in many years uprearing its head loftily, without disguise. After a few seconds of this wonderful mutual regard, he stooped and took her hand in his, saying simply, "I thank you," and would have raised it to his lips, but the little tremble in it and the magnetism of its touch overcame his most deter-

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mined resistance. He paused, looking at her in passionate indecision and uncertainty. She made the slightest movement, it could scarcely be called a motion, so slight it was, but rather a sign of yielding and invitation. His tall frame shook, he swayed a little toward her, and the next moment he had her in his arms, her head was on his breast, and her faithful, loyal eyes were looking into his with such love and confidence as made him for the instant forgetful of the disgrace that attached to him.

Almost immediately he remembered himself, and would have put her from him ; but she would not allow it. Clinging to him with beseeching arms, she held the divine in him subservient to the human.

“ You love me, Murray ? ” she whispered, for she knew from what cause his reluctance sprang. “ Tell me so : you have said you are free to do so.”

He made no answer, only tightened his embrace.

“ Tell me,” she pleaded. “ Murray, ask for my love, since you may.”

Then the splendid confidence of the woman touched deeper springs within him than those of mere brute passion, and, though groaning audibly, and inwardly cursing the necessity that constrained him, he put her from him,

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turning aside to bury his face in the arm he had laid along the mantel.

"I have never said I was free to ask it," he replied, "never. I have never thought it, even."

She fell back, with wide and wondering eyes, and sank into the chair behind her.

"I thought the law had freed you wholly," she cried, brokenly. A swift, burning blush spread over her face, for it seemed to her now that she had committed a horrible, a most inexcusable and unwomanly action in offering herself to him.

He discerned the shame and wounded modesty in her tone, and raised his face.

"And so it has," he responded,— "from her. But the same law that loosed me from my marriage bond restrains me with honorable scruples from allowing any woman whom I respect to become my wife. What man would ask a lady to share a dishonored name? I should be unworthy your love were I capable of asking you to give it to me."

She rose again impetuously to her feet, her face once more radiant and glowing with love and tender pride in his honor.

"Then do not ask it," she cried, holding out her beautiful hands to him. "Let me bestow it unasked, as a free, spontaneous gift. Take it, Murray ; it is yours,—all the love of a

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woman's heart that has never known love before. Will you have it?"

He made no answer, but stood looking at her with such eyes as a man about to lay his head upon the block might fix upon a distant rider galloping toward him with a possible pardon. There was no color in his face, no expression in any feature but the eyes; these alone showed the strength of the struggle between desire and abnegation that was going on within him. Whiter, whiter grew the pallor of his face; sterner, sterner the rigidity of its lines; and the stillness in the room made the breathing of both distinctly audible. Then, abruptly, he turned his back upon those supplicating hands and walked with quick strides away from the temptation that menaced his honor. At a distance, he wheeled about and answered her.

"No, no; I will not," he replied. "You can never know, it is impossible for any one who has not suffered as I have to know, what courage it takes to refuse this that you offer me. But, whatever else my faults, I hope to God I am no coward, to take advantage of your love and confidence."

She was no whit less brave than he. She felt that on this stake rested all the hope and happiness of her future; and she was willing to play high rather than lose it. She moved

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swiftly across the room until she stood close beside him.

"Murray," she said, "do you love me?"

He raised a hand, deprecating further torture.

"Don't!" he cried. "Oh, for God's sake, spare me! I am only human, after all!"

She smiled in triumph. It was her wish to tempt him beyond his strength.

"You do; I know it. Well, then, what does the rest amount to? My position is assured. The man who becomes my husband may have *entrée* into any club or drawing-room in America. Your lot need not be among the scavengers of society; the elect shall delight to honor you."

"And you would have me stand in such debt to you! Even a man's wife may not be his creditor to that extent. I could not, so burdened, stand upright before the world. I should soon grow to bend and shuffle in my walk; before long even you would learn to despise me."

"Never! Murray, you are over-sensitive, over-scrupulous."

"Neither. I am a man of honor, despite the fact that I have been a felon; that is all."

"You have never been a felon; confess it."

"The law has said so. Its verdict suffices."

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“For those who do not love you. Not for Sylvia and me.”

She suddenly abridged the short distance between them, and, before he suspected her intention, had seized his hands and had drawn his arms about her, while she laid her head upon his breast. Thus holding him at complete disadvantage, she turned her soft glance upward to his face, seconding her entreaty with the passionate pleading of her eyes.

“Murray,” she whispered, with fast-beating heart, for she felt that if this desperate venture failed her cause was indeed lost, “tell me who it was for whom you sacrificed more than your life.”

He stood, dumb and inert, suffering her embrace, but not returning it. The muscles that longed to clasp her to him were constrained by his will to remain lax and limp, even in contact with so great temptation.

“Tell me, tell me, Murray. It is my due. Who has a nearer claim upon you than I? With whom should your most intimate secrets be shared, if not with the woman who returns your love with, oh, my beloved, with all her heart and soul?” She felt him tremble in her clasp, and believed she was forcing his determination. “Murray,” she continued, “you say my faith in you has been exceptional: shall it not have even this reward?”

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His arms grew suddenly tense about her, and she exulted. Under the dark moustache that now shaded them, she saw his lips tremble. She waited in dread suspense, fearing, hoping, dreading, but loving—oh, loving and pitying, beyond and above all other sensations. Presently he spoke, slowly, and with great deliberation.

“What good would it do you to know? What purpose should I serve in sharing my wretched secret with you? Would you, could you, guard it as I have done?”

The earnestness and gravity of his gaze compelled her to truth. She had not questioned him thus through mere feminine inquisitiveness. She had no longer curiosity on this subject, since she had come to feel a deeper and more personal interest in him. Her faith in him was all-sufficing to her love. The day when she had idly speculated upon his guilt or innocence was long past. But she had a passionate desire to see him cleared of an offence of which she knew him to be innocent; to see him reinstated in that public opinion which is the atmosphere of society. She could not deny that this was the motive of her interrogation. She shook her head.

“No,” she murmured, candidly; “no, I could not.”

“Then why would you know it?”

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"To clear you before men."

He smiled grimly. "That I could not allow."

"Why?" she broke forth, passionately. "Why? why? Murray, do you not see that it is not yourself only you are sacrificing to this unknown Moloch? Do you not see that you are making offering also of Sylvia and me? Are you sure that you have a right to do this? Is the altar upon which you are rendering up so many lives a worthy one?"

She had withdrawn herself from his embrace, and, as she put the question to him, earnestly and seriously, she stood with her hands both laid upon his shoulders, regarding him with eyes that were of almost judicial severity. He made a quick, impulsive motion, and caught her again to him.

"No, no, no!" he exclaimed. "My God! it is not a worthy one, Charlotte. It is wholly unappreciative and careless of the sacrifices I have made it; and yet—and yet—I have no choice but to continue them."

He held her close, and kissed her many times. She had conquered him up to a certain point; beyond that he stood firm and resolved. He bent his head and pressed his cheek against hers; with tender touch he smoothed the ruddy locks back from her white brow; with covetous eyes he scrutinized every line and feature of

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her face. With his whole soul he worshipped this fair woman who had so frankly shown her faith in him, a proscribed outcast. Then, reluctantly but firmly, he put her from him and again turned aside. He went to a window, and stood, with unseeing eyes, gazing into the street. She, feeling that the end of all things was approaching, passed over to the fire, and, with a hand upon the mantel where his arm had lain, stood looking into the flames.

Maule knocked, and asked if he should serve tea. She said no, and he retired, closing the door again behind him. A few moments more passed, and then Van Vorst came toward her, with outstretched hand. He had regained control of himself. His face wore its customary expression of hopeless resignation.

"Good-by," he said. "I shall write you. I may, may I not?"

"You are really going, then?" she asked, lifting a despairing glance to his.

"I must. You cannot wish to condemn me to such petty torture as each day in New York inflicts. It is more than a supreme inquisition."

"But you go into complete exile and the worst kind of isolation,—that shared by strangers."

"I have been ten years qualifying for the endurance of it."

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Then, overcome by the thought of the cruel past that lay behind him, and the dreary expatriation and solitude to which he was consigning his future, she turned her head aside to hide the tears which rolled down her cheeks, while her frame shook with heavy sobs. Van Vorst sprang forward, and put his arm again about her.

"Charlotte! Great God! don't make the path of righteousness too hard for me to tread, my darling!" he cried, drawing her to him until her head rested once more upon his breast.

As ill luck would have it, Maule had temporarily relinquished his duty of answering the door-bell to a footman, forgetting to direct his substitute to employ the formula of exclusion to any guests that might present themselves. In consequence of this oversight, the drawing-room door was at that moment thrown open, and Martin uttered an announcement that produced greater effect upon his mistress and her visitor than if he had exploded in the room a dynamite bomb.

"Mrs. Yorke," he said, at the same time drawing back to allow that lady to enter.

She came effusively forward, traversing the considerable distance that intervened between the door and the fireplace before which her hostess stood, with rustling skirts and swift

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movement, her near-sighted eyes screwed up narrowly that they might better focus the occupants of the room. She was a tall woman, thin, excepting where meagreness could be disguised by art, with touches of color skilfully laid upon a naturally pale skin, myopic eyes of a greenish-gray shade, and an exceedingly well adjusted mass of acquired auburn hair, upon which a very modish toque, of a design suitable to her daughter's years, rested jauntily. She wore a very rich and elegant calling-costume of costly velvet and fur, and presented a most effective and striking *tout ensemble*. It was only when one was close enough to her to penetrate the flattering medium of the black-dotted veil of white illusion, which softened her features and gave delicacy to her complexion, that the fine net-work of lines, here and there, about the eyes and mouth particularly, deepening into actual wrinkles, became apparent. At a certain range and to the casual observer she presented the appearance of a very youthful woman,—almost of a girl, indeed.

“Ah, Mrs. Pendexter,” she exclaimed, approaching, with a hand gloved in pearl-colored kid extended in greeting, “so glad to find you at home!”

Her voice, keyed to a suavity that one felt to be adopted, suddenly, in conclusion, took

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on an unmusical edge. Her short sight had discovered who was Charlotte Pendexter's companion. Also she had perceived that both these persons upon whom she had intruded were making desperate efforts to conquer some recent powerful emotion and present to her gaze an aspect of ordinary composure and conventional indifference.

"Excuse me, I am *de trop*," she continued, abruptly, and with no further attempt to disguise the natural sharpness of her voice. "Your servant must be held responsible for my malapropos entrance. He was at fault in admitting me."

A woman of better breeding and greater self-command would never have allowed her temper so to betray her annoyance. The situation was an embarrassing one, but had the intruder been of different calibre she might have conquered it gracefully and with dignity. The fact was, Cynthia Yorke's temperament was a quick and violent one, and she bore two grudges against Mrs. Pendexter, both of which touched her most intimate feelings very closely. One of these, arising from Charlotte's collusion with Stephen Lennox in an attempt to frustrate her own ambitious designs for Sylvia's future, she had proved, by her daughter's own confession, to be well grounded. The other, rooted in Mrs. Pendexter's rumored espousal

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of the cause of the husband she herself had cast off, and her currently reported encouragement of Van Vorst's devotion, was now suddenly strengthened by incontrovertible evidence. Her sensitive temper was not proof against a double attack.

Her obvious anger and sneering innuendo restored Mrs. Pendexter more quickly than an attempt to pass lightly over the awkwardness of the situation would have done. She lifted her head haughtily, and met her guest's flaming glance frigidly.

"Quite the contrary," she said, with distant courtesy, but as smoothly as if no *contre-temps* existed. "Your visit is most opportune. Mr. Van Vorst"—with a wave of the hand in his direction and an interpolated "Mrs. Yorke" by way of introducing two persons who had once borne to each other the closest of all relations—"is just leaving. Your visit insures me against solitude. Pray be seated."

She turned, as she spoke, to Van Vorst, naturally, easily, with outstretched hand.

"Since you must go," she said, "good-by."

Van Vorst bowed over her hand and turned, inclining his head with the formal courtesy of a stranger toward the other woman. The absolute ceremony with which he treated her nettled Cynthia Yorke's irascible and already

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provoked spirit. She felt impelled to arrest his departure, to demonstrate to these two, in some direct and explicit fashion, how she contemned them : to mortify the woman before her lover, and to humiliate the lover before the mistress of his affections.

"One moment, sir," she interposed, hastily. "I did not anticipate meeting you here, despite the many rumors which associate your name with"—she cast an ugly, vindictive smile at Charlotte—"Mrs. Pendexter's. One instructed in the traditions of our best society, of which our hostess is so charming and eminent a member, places slight confidence in reports which indicate that the lofty Pendexter pride would permit a member of its order to seek affiliation with—pardon me—er ah—you understand !"

She shrugged her shoulders with an inexpressibly insulting gesture, and lifted her eyebrows significantly.

Charlotte Pendexter started and would have spoken, but Van Vorst deliberately placed himself in front of her, and took upon his own shoulders the burden of the interview.

"It was my intention to withdraw, madam," he said, contemplating the enraged woman with a glance which would have abashed any other than her, "but, since it seems your purpose in coming hither is to insult the lady whose

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house you have invaded, I shall remain to protect her from your attacks."

The malicious smile in Cynthia Yorke's eyes deepened.

"That is well," she returned. "My errand, after all, had chiefly to do with you, and I can now seek the information I desire at the source, instead of through even so charming a channel." She emphasized her allusion by an ironical toss of her head toward Charlotte. "I had need of your address."

"I cannot imagine for what reason."

"Because it was required, and for the past three months it has lost the stability which characterized it for ten years."

The thrust, delivered in the presence of the woman he loved, stung the man to the quick. Charlotte Pendexter, standing behind him, failed to catch the look laden with meaning which sped from his eyes to what remnant of heart might yet remain in the breast of her who had been his wife. But his words were distinctly audible.

"Ten years," he repeated, enunciating every syllable clearly and sharply. "Yes, for ten years you had good reason to know where you might find me should you have need of me. Ten years! It is a long price to pay for a mere youthful error of judgment; do you not think so?"

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Mrs. Yorke flushed, but in an instant recovered her *aplomb*, She quite understood him to refer to the mistake he had made in the choice of a wife, but this only provoked her to greater desire for retaliation. She saw how his words might be twisted to his own prejudice, and she had such confidence in him as to believe that, though her taunts might provoke him to retort in veiled allusions intelligible to her alone, she might goad him to death before he would avenge his wrongs, publicly, at her expense. She gave a little hollow, heartless laugh, mocking and intensely irritating. It caused Charlotte to clinch her hands until their pointed nails wounded her delicate flesh.

"An error of judgment!" she repeated.
"We are indulgent to our own crimes."

"We are, indeed," he agreed, hastily. Then, forgetting every circumstance of his surroundings save this, that he was face to face with the woman who had ruined his life and whose relentless vanity was still persecuting him, he added, cuttingly, and with unmistakable point and meaning, "Sometimes we refuse to acknowledge them at all, even to the extent of allowing others to suffer for them."

She had gone too far ; she had aroused the devil that underlies the divine in every nature. She recognized her error the instant she spoke, before he opened his lips to reply. His self-

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restraint had yielded to too great provocation. For once the tide of pent-up feeling had its way ; but regret followed hard upon it, and he repented his words even before they died away upon the air. He would have given a million dollars gladly to recall them, when he realized what result they had effected. He lashed himself for a cur, a scoundrel, a villain, to have permitted any amount of provocation to induce him to expose that wretchedly attainted honor which he considered it his duty to shield, even from its own weakness and sin.

He turned swiftly, with crimson face, as he heard a quick cry behind him. He threw out his arm as if to hold back the woman who, with glowing cheeks and fiercely reproachful eyes, was moving forward with an impetuous rush to confront Cynthia Yorke.

"Wait ! wait !" he cried. "Charlotte, you are mistaken ; you have not heard aright. It was of another matter we were speaking."

But she paid him scant attention. She smiled incredulously at his words, and continued to advance without pause, until she stood opposite Mrs. Yorke. From head to foot she scanned her, with deliberate, crushing scorn, and the silence which preceded her speech was more eloquent of her contempt and loathing than the speech itself.

"So it was you !" she finally exclaimed, in

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measured, disdainful accents. "It was to shield you he did this thing ! A woman had need to be well-nigh a goddess, it seems to me, for a man to make utter sacrifice of the ten best years of his life for her sake. And you——ah ! I had forgotten ! you are my guest ; I am not at liberty to express my opinion of you."

She turned abruptly aside, as if she could no longer bear the sight of the face and form she confronted. With a quick gesture, she stretched out both hands to Van Vorst.

"Mrs. Yorke," she said, as Murray took them and held them closely in the grasp of one of his large palms, "you have taunted me with shirking, through pride, an alliance with the man I love. Let me tell you, now, that before I had any reason, save that of my own intuitions, for believing Murray Van Vorst an unjustly persecuted man, I had such faith in him as to beg him to marry me. He was too scrupulous to listen to my entreaties. Now I ask him once again, here in your presence, to crown my life with the greatest honor it has ever received." She transferred her regard from Cynthia Yorke to that lady's former husband, and there was sweet humility as well as proud supplication in her look as it rested upon him. "Murray Van Vorst," she said, with no bashful hesitation, but with free, solemn utter-

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ance, "will you have me, Charlotte Pendexter, for your wife?"

It was an intensely dramatic moment. The deepest, strongest passions of humanity were depicted on the faces of the little group. There was sublime devotion on that of Charlotte Pendexter; there was the desire of a man for the woman he loves, battling with the scruples of a gentleman for the honor he respects, on that of Van Vorst; there was hatred, there was revenge, there were malice and all uncharitableness, upon that of Cynthia Yorke, as she bent involuntarily forward in her eagerness to discover what should be the result of Charlotte's appeal.

A cloud of disappointment settled upon her brow as his decision issued unhesitatingly, and with absolute finality, from Van Vorst's lips. She would have had him accept the offer made him, feeling assured, through her intimate knowledge of his character, that less happiness would ensue to him as the outcome of a victory gained through a breach in his honor than by defeat won from the preservation of his integrity. She was likewise convinced that a marriage which the world would consider a *mésalliance* must before long be productive of regret and dissatisfaction to the proud spirit of Charlotte Pendexter.

Van Vorst raised one delicate hand to his

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lips, and then dropped both from his clasp, gently, reverently.

"It is impossible," he replied. "You have honored me beyond anything I have ever dreamed of, Mrs. Pendexter, and I have no words at command in which to thank you. But the name I bear is fit for no woman's wearing,—least of all for yours." He faced Mrs. Yorke. "Now, madam," he said, "will you allow me to conduct you to your carriage?"

She made no reply, but proceeded to leave the room. He followed a few paces behind her. On the threshold she paused, and accosted him, in a hard, defiant tone.

"After all," she remarked, "I have not accomplished my errand. What is your address?"

"I reserve to myself the privilege of retaining that," he replied. "I have no desire to enter into communication with you."

She made a contemptuous gesture with her hand.

"Oh," she exclaimed, "You need not fear that. It is not for myself I ask it."

His heart leaped. Was she going to allow Sylvia to come to him openly, instead of meeting him clandestinely? Life might yet hold some compensations, after all.

"For whom, then?" he asked, in a lighter tone.

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"My father is dying and would have it." She spoke sullenly, as if she held her father's wish in disfavor.

"Your father?"

"My father. Strange, is it not?"

"Most strange!" He reflected an instant, holding the door open for her to pass out; then he continued, "I think I will reserve the right to withhold it from him also. I have paid the debt he thought I owed him, with interest. There is no need for fresh communication to be opened between us. Tell him so."

A gleam of satisfaction glittered in the myopic eyes. The two passed from the room, and Charlotte was left alone.





CHAPTER V.

"I TELL you, mamma, I will never marry this Englishman, never. If you are setting your heart upon my making some grand match, you may as well abandon the idea, for—I do not wish to seem disobedient or disrespectful, but I shall never be the wife of any man, unless it is my cousin Stephen."

"Then you will die an old maid."

"There are worse fates."

"But few worse failures. A spinster is a social abortion."

"I would rather be such than part of that hideous social duality, a wretched marriage."

Mrs. Yorke shrugged her shoulders contemptuously.

"There is no need for such a thing as a wretched marriage to exist," she replied. "No marriage need be wretched simply because of incompatibility. If there is money enough, a woman has ample compensations for mere sentimental dissatisfaction."

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“What are they, mamma?”

Mrs. Yorke leaned back in her chair and raised from the *châtelaine* at her side a tiny silver box, which she proceeded to open. Before she lifted the lid, however, Sylvia sprang forward and intercepted the action, kneeling at her mother's side and gazing affectionately and deprecatingly up into the lustreless eyes.

“Don't, mamma; please don't,” she entreated. “You know they are so bad for you.”

But the elder woman shook off the small hand impatiently.

“Nonsense, Sylvia,” she responded. “If your head troubled you as mine does——”

“But there is Dr. Flint's medicine, mamma. Let me get it; it is so much better for you.”

Mrs. Yorke let the little box drop back again.

“Well, well, child,” she acquiesced, impatiently, “get it, then.”

A look of relief chased the anxious expression from the girl's eyes. She rose quickly and kissed her mother's brow.

“Thank you, mamma,” she murmured, and departed with hasty step to fetch the anodyne.

As the door closed behind her, Mrs. Yorke again took up the box, and, quickly lifting the cover, conveyed two of the small, white tablets it contained to her mouth, with a surreptitious

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movement which indicated a consciousness of guilt.

"Medicine!" she murmured, contemptuously; "there is nothing to take the place of morphine. Compared with it, everything else is like so much water."

She dropped her head back and closed her eyes. By the time Sylvia returned with the phial, the wan look had disappeared from her mother's face, a faint flush had crept under the skin, her eyes were brighter, and she looked quite restored and refreshed.

"The attack has passed off, Sylvia," she observed. "You may put the bottle here on the table, where I can reach it should the pain come back."

Sylvia glanced penetratingly into the face before her. Then, expressing no gratification at her mother's relief, she fulfilled the bidding with set lips and frowning brow. She knew what had happened during her absence as well as if she had been omniscient. That constantly exercised habit of evasion and prevarication sorely taxed her daughterly love. She could not help despising her mother when she practised it. She went back to her embroidery, her thoughts dwelling upon the subject of lying, dissimulation, and deceit.

Two days had passed since Mrs. Yorke paid her visit to Charlotte Pendexter. She returned

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home that afternoon in so uncomfortable and irritable a frame of mind that it was apparent to Sylvia that something had happened to provoke and antagonize her. What that something was, she naturally had no means of ascertaining ; nor was it possible for her even to form a conjecture remotely approximating the truth. Although her mother's mood had affected her more or less, as we must all respond in some degree to the depression or elation of those who surround us, yet Sylvia had been too greatly preoccupied with her own concerns to dwell at length upon the cause of the maternal disquietude. For the very next morning there had come to her, through the mail, a letter containing tidings which much afflicted her. It was necessary for her to broach the subject of this letter to her mother, in order to obtain her consent to the interview which it was the main object of the letter to secure ; although the girl had fully determined that if this consent were withheld she would act without it, for her ardent attachment to her father refused to permit him to set forth upon a prolonged journey into distant countries, whence he might never return, without a leave-taking. How best to introduce the matter had occasioned her long and serious deliberation, which up to the present moment had been productive of no satisfactory results. Now, how-

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ever, as she resumed her seat by the window and gathered up her work, a sudden disgust, an intolerable loathing of the maternal methods of evasion, took violent possession of her, and fired her with a strong resentment that was a very good makeshift for courage, in the accomplishment of her design.

She was a high-strung creature, was Sylvia Yorke, candid, truthful, honest, and open as the day, scorning subterfuge and prevarication as the meanest and most despicable of human qualities, and incapable of making allowance for any obliquity of moral vision. Right and wrong were clearly defined terms to her; she was never troubled by any vagueness of outline between them. Fraud and deceit she deemed inexcusable and hateful, and she had never grown indulgent of her mother's careless handling of facts and of her general evasiveness. Of anything worse than this, of deliberate dishonesty of purpose, of actually designed and wilfully determined falsehood and double-dealing, she never for an instant suspected her capable. And it was well, since intimate relationship necessitated their living together, that such was the case. It was hard enough, even as matters stood, for the girl so to regulate her mind and speech as to support a fictitious appearance of congeniality between them. The absolute divergence of her char-

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acter in its development from that of the mother with whom she had been so closely associated from her birth gave the lie to the oft-quoted assertion that we are the creatures of our environment.

True as the aphorism may be in many cases, in that of Sylvia Yorke it was absolutely false. In no degree had she adapted herself to the surroundings with which her mother had furnished her ; nor had the maternal laxity of principle in any wise contaminated her. She cared little for luxury, nothing for society, preserved a scornful attitude toward fashion, and was as true and upright as she was impulsive and affectionate. Up to the age of ten, she had been the pet and companion of her father. Him she had respected and revered with all her little heart. It had been her unexpressed conviction that her king could do no wrong ; and from that conviction she had never swerved, even when, after long years of uncomprehended and impatiently endured separation, it had finally been explained to her why the bond between father and child had been rudely snapped asunder, leaving her, poor little heart-broken child, wretched and disconsolate beyond anything imaginable by the mature beings who surrounded her, to wonder and speculate and grieve concerning the cause which had robbed her of her beloved comrade and playfellow.

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Perhaps the truth never would have been told her had she not resolutely demanded it upon her eighteenth birthday. It was to her grandfather she put the question, actuated by a determination to know the real facts, and having little confidence in any version of them she might be able to extract from her mother. Samuel Yorke, a straightforward, plain-dealing old man, if a somewhat close-fisted and inexorable one, gave her a direct answer to her question. Her father, Murray Van Vorst, had been intrusted with the management of Mr. Yorke's property. Implicit confidence had been placed in him, and he had been given power of attorney to sign his father-in-law's name to any extent and to all documents requiring such signature. He had been living extravagantly, far beyond his means, and was considerably in debt. To relieve himself of the pressure of creditors, he had for some time been drawing false checks upon Mr. Yorke, made payable to himself and signed by himself, as Samuel Yorke's attorney.

The fraud had been running three weeks, and the amount of the embezzlement had reached fifty thousand dollars, before the president of the bank upon which the checks were drawn, suspecting some irregularity from the fact that Van Vorst was so frequently made

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payee of checks drawn by himself, paid a visit to old Yorke and disclosed the facts.

"Then," said the stern old man, addressing the girl upon the saddest of all subjects to which a child may be called upon to listen, the subject of a parent's guilt,—“even then, if your father had come forward like a man and confessed his sin, I might have been moved to forgive it and hush the matter up. This, however, he did not choose to do. Like a block of wood he stood while, in the presence of John Ireland [the bank president], I made the accusation. When I had finished, he made neither acknowledgment nor confession, but, like a child whining for its mother, asked to be permitted to see his wife before replying to the charge. Doubtless he hoped to shelter himself behind my daughter's petticoats from the punishment his own dastardly conduct had earned him. It was a cause of rejoicing to me that my daughter stood firm, refusing to be moved from rectitude of judgment by the pleading of a scoundrel. What passed between them I do not know, for their interview was in private ; but it is safe to say that the ordeal was a severe one to your mother. She came forth from it a wreck ; while he, the villain that had brought such disgrace upon those who had loved and trusted him, gave little sign that he repented his crime.”

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At this point the old man's recital had been interrupted by Sylvia, who was leaning forward, half out of her chair, in fact, with her fair young face all twisted and distorted by pain and excruciating mental agony. Remember, she had, until now, heard nothing of all this, and the processes of love and adoration had built within her heart an idealized image of heroic mould, before which her soul had been upon its knees in worship all these past years. Her father's name had been tabooed in the household, but the secrecy required of it had only helped on the cumulative worship. Now she whispered, feverishly, "Grandpapa, did he confess his guilt?" and hung breathless on the answer.

A harsh frown contracted old Yorke's brow.

"No," he ejaculated, "he was not man enough to do that."

The girl gave a cry so sharp and joyously exultant that it startled the old man. "Oh! then he denied it!" she exclaimed, joyfully.

But her grandfather cut short her rapture with phlegmatic brevity.

"Nothing of the sort," he growled. "He stubbornly refused to plead either way. 'You have found me guilty of gross fraud,' he said. 'I refuse either to attempt to clear or incriminate myself. Sentence me, and I will accept

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the punishment you see fit to accord me,'— which was tantamount to confession."

"I do not see it," the girl had returned to this, and a glow of faith and fidelity was in her eyes as she spoke.

Her grandfather gave a grim but indulgent laugh; for this child was the dearest creature on earth to him, and he was tolerant of those little obstinate conclusions of hers, to which she was prone and of which she was tenacious.

"Possibly not," he returned, good-naturedly. "There is an old adage about the blindness of those who do not wish to see. You remember it, eh, Sylvie?"

And so the momentous occasion to which Sylvia had for years looked forward had fulfilled itself. She had learned the facts which had been the theme of her dreams by night and of her speculations by day since that awful moment when, alone with her father in his study for the last time, she had been strained to his heart with a fervor and passion which were then incomprehensible to her, but which she now knew to have been born of renunciation and the pain of parting. Distinct in her memory, for she had treasured them choicely, were the words that had issued from those dear lips, whose pallor and tremulousness had painfully impressed her even then: "My little daughter! My little daughter! Be a good

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girl; be a good woman. Be truthful; be honest; be true." And then, she remembered, he had taken her little arms and put them close about his neck, and had held her face between his palms and looked and looked and looked into it, with his own so near that she had been well-nigh frightened by over-intimacy with its lineaments.

"Sylvia," he had then said, "will you always remember papa? If they ever tell you he did wrong, remember, my little girl, he has always meant to do what was right."

The girl's mind was vaguely occupied with these past events now, as she sat, with drawn brow and compressed lips, bending over her embroidery. These memories, constantly recurring to her faithful heart, had been especially aroused within a few hours by the reception of that letter of whose contents she wished to apprise her mother. She had so long fruitlessly weighed the matter of introducing the topic that she finally concluded to abandon all attempts at diplomacy and plunge boldly into the subject.

"Mamma," she began, with such abruptness that Mrs. Yorke, who was placidly enjoying the pleasant results of her surreptitious dose, started nervously in her chair, "I want you to recall your injunction forbidding me to see my father."

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A white shade stole about the corners of Cynthia Yorke's mouth, a little metallic glitter came into her eyes, and the sharp accents of her voice clove the air like a knife.

"Indeed!" she exclaimed. "You seem to be asserting yourself to-day, my dear. Has anything occurred of late, pray, to disqualify me from directing your conduct?"

Sylvia laid down her work and braced herself for the coming struggle. She knew it would be, in all probability, the most violent and crucial of all the many differences which widely opposing temperaments had wrought between her mother and herself; and, had the stake been of smaller importance, she would have surrendered it rather than enter into so fierce a contention as this she felt to be imminent.

"Yes," she returned, slowly, and with weighty deliberation, "I think something has occurred."

"And what, may I ask, is this extraordinary event?"

There was a slight pause. Then, very steadily and with no trace of that heat which sarcasm in an antagonist usually provokes, Sylvia replied, gravely,—

"I have become a woman, mother."

Mrs. Yorke raised her lorgnette to her short-sighted eyes.

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"Ah, indeed! How interesting! And I had not observed any marked change in you. Pray rise, child, and let me see if the transition is apparent in your general appearance."

A less sensitive spirit than Sylvia's would have winced beneath the ironical impertinence of look and speech. She flushed, but otherwise gave no sign that her adversary had drawn first blood. As if the mocking words had not been spoken, she went firmly on:

"I have become a woman, and am therefore capable of judging to what extent I shall hereafter obey you and allow you to govern my actions. I should prefer that our views might so coincide as to permit me to remain, what I have always tried to be, a dutiful daughter to you. But if this cannot be, if you forbid my following what my conscience assures me to be a right and proper course, then I must set your commands at defiance and act according to my own decisions. You,"—she hesitated, clasping her hands nervously together and dropping her voice, but enunciating every syllable so clearly that each seemed delivered with emphasis,—“you are not the only one to whom I owe obedience, mamma: my father has a claim upon me which I hold to be fully the equal of yours.”

Mrs. Yorke's face was white as death. All evil passions appeared to be centred in her

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small eyes. The glance she cast upon Sylvia was filled with malevolence. It was evident that this unexpected opposition upon her daughter's part had incensed her beyond measure.

"Do you quite understand what that father is, whose claims you boast?" she asked, sneeringly.

"Quite : a gentleman and a martyr."

Mrs. Yorke started and shot a questioning look, not unmixed with apprehension, at the pale, resolute face across the room. Had Sylvia learned anything? Had she suspicions?—or was her speech merely the outcome of romantic, youthful enthusiasm? She would assume the latter to be the case : she must do so. She laughed scornfully.

"A felon and a convict, you had better say," she corrected, pitilessly.

Sylvia sprang from her seat. Her blue eyes were flaming, her cheeks burning, and her voice trembled so violently that the words she uttered were fairly shaken out upon the air.

"Stop ! Stop !" she cried, commandingly, in an imperious tone such as she never before in her whole life had used to any one. "No matter what you think him, you shall not traduce him to me, his daughter !"

She crossed the room with swift steps, and

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halted only when she stood directly in front of her mother, who had likewise risen in wrath. They faced each other with hostile looks, and the natural antagonism of their characters was plainly indicated by their mutual regard.

"Shall I not, indeed? And who has a better right than I to enlighten you concerning your father? Who has a more intimate knowledge of a man's true nature than his wife?"

"You were never my father's wife!" the girl cried, lost to all recollection of her filial obligations to her whom she was addressing. "A man's wife is the other part of himself; the woman who shares his sorrows as well as his joys; who reaps the results of his misdeeds as well as of his virtuous actions; whose heart leaps when his rejoices; whose tears fall when he weeps; who would share his exile were he banished, bind up and comfort his wounds were he attacked, and who would cling to and love him through evil as well as through good report. Which of these things have you done? None. The fair-weather partner of a few years of his life you may have been, but his wife in the sight of God—never!"

Her hot eloquence had a pronounced effect. Those clearly articulated, uncompromising truths went home to Cynthia Yorke with surprising force. There were reasons, unsuspected by Sylvia, why her words were like

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barbed arrows in her mother's breast. Severe as the girl afterward felt them to be, she did not dream even then how they had stung and wounded and rankled where they struck ; for, try as she would, Mrs. Yorke had never found it possible to obliterate from her mind the thought of a man suffering voluntary imprisonment for a crime of her own committing. Not that she even now regretted permitting the sacrifice, but the recollection of it had never ceased to harass and disturb her complacency. Therefore it was that Sylvia's weapons of speech were tinged with unimagined venom. In addition to this there was the fact of the girl's rebellion, to inflame her mother's temper. If there still existed in the world any being for whom the woman felt unselfish attachment, that being was the one child who had been born to her, and for whose possession she had been called upon to suffer. Possibly it was the very fact that those agonizing birth-throes had cost her something of self-abnegation, which had endeared to her, above all other living creatures, the object purchased by their means.

It was a matter of pride with her to stand well in Sylvia's sight. She had an unacknowledged regard for her daughter's good opinion, and what scant self-discipline she had ever exercised since the girl reached maturity had been called into action by a desire to retain

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it. Up to now, if she had not commanded her full respect, she had received enough of it to satisfy the unexacting requirements of her shallow nature. She was one of those women whose habit it is to live in an atmosphere of semi-strife with those about them. Petty internecine warfare, constantly occurring crises of small importance, the transforming of mole-hills of disagreement into mountains of fretful argument, had made her insensible to fine shades in the matter of filial respect.

So long as Sylvia made no overt manifestation of disrespect or disobedience, she was content to believe her daughterly attitude all that it should be ; and Sylvia, hating inharmony and mean contention, was careful to avoid occasions of breeding them. But the spirit of disaffection and opposition, though resolutely crushed down and kept under, had always existed within the girl, and had grown with her growth and matured with her development. Faint indications that it glowed beneath that thin crust of pretended filial reverence which had been sufficient to mislead the mother's vanity now and then manifested themselves ; but never before this had the flames of scornful judgment and recrimination flared actually through the surface. Indeed, scarcely were the words out of her mouth when Sylvia repented them. She was distinctly surprised and

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shocked by the fierce heat and animosity she had displayed. She, also, had never suspected what powerful reserves of indignant resentment had been gathering force within her during the years since she had come to womanhood. She melted now, as she saw the white, shaken look upon her mother's face, for the latter was confronting a possibility which for ten years she had weakly and shrinkingly refused to contemplate, but which had been brought prominently into view by Sylvia's words,—the possibility that now, the girl being of age and free to choose between her parents, she might make such choice as should leave herself, Cynthia, to a desolate and forsaken old age. No wonder the wretched apology for the principal organ of life, which performed its offices so feebly in her bosom, was stricken and refused to quicken her pulses. No wonder her face was set and drawn and well-nigh livid. Even though the blood be cold, its circulation must be free to preserve equilibrium within the body, and the most selfish nature has some vulnerable point through which the flow of the tide may be attacked and arrested.

Contrite and repentant, believing that her own transgressions had pained and distressed her mother to the degree evinced by her look and demeanor, Sylvia sprang forward and grasped the cold, inert hands in hers.

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“Mamma dear,” she pleaded, “forgive me ; I did not mean to speak so harshly and inconsiderately. I should remember how bitterly you must have suffered, how convinced you must have been of my father’s guilt and unworthiness, what a fearful struggle must have taken place in your heart, before you could have broken the holy tie that bound you to him. I do not suppose that any one in all the world can imagine what you have endured, mamma. I have grieved, too,—oh, more than you would believe. For my father’s loss alone, even without the conviction of his guilt which was added to your burden, was a terrible affliction to me. But what could my grief or suffering or sorrow be, compared to your agony? I should remember this ; I should always remember what it must cost a woman to rupture the most sacred of all relationships. I cannot understand how you could have credited any evidence against him, mamma. It seems to me impossible that you could have been persuaded of his guilt, even though he acknowledged it to you in that private interview before he gave himself up to justice. I would not have believed him even if he had made such a statement under oath. I would even then have suspected that he was shielding some one else. But, since you did believe it, mamma, I should make allowances for

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your credulity, and pity rather than blame you."

Mrs. Yorke had sunk again into her chair, and Sylvia had thrown herself upon her knees beside it, in the attitude of a petitioner; for not yet had her request been granted. The face of the mother had grown even more pinched and haggard; that of the daughter was a radiant contrast by virtue of the look of pure exaltation which transfigured it. So full of her subject was the girl, so preoccupied with her own enthusiasm, that she failed to notice the stealthy movement of her mother's hand toward her *châtelaine*. Not till the small white tablets were being raised to the colorless lips did she realize what the action portended. Then she shook her head, sadly and despondently.

"Oh, mamma!" she sighed, reproachfully.

But Mrs. Yorke had been too profoundly stirred by a more moving disquisition to heed this. Sylvia had made two allusions to an act of self-abnegation on her father's part. She felt that she could not rest until she found out what ground the girl had for this conjecture. It was a dangerous conclusion for her to hold, no matter at whom it was aimed, and she must disabuse her mind of it at once and forever. Morphine would lend her the strength necessary to the accomplishment of the task. She

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scarcely noted the feeble remonstrance, therefore, but reverted directly to the former subject. Her eyes were turned aside as she put her question with its prelude, and her voice sounded very weak and thin ; but she controlled herself to speak without apparent emotion.

“You have twice alluded to your father’s assuming the onus of this felony as an act of self-sacrifice upon his part, undertaken for the purpose of shielding another. May I ask if your remarkable presumption has any reason for being, and, if so, at whom the finger of your suspicion points ?”

She made a valiant effort to preserve an ironical dignity till the last word was uttered, but her voice faltered a little in conclusion, and her thin, nerveless fingers caught at and pinched the folds of her gown where her restless hands lay upon it.

Sylvia shook her head, and exercised a strong command over that traitorous perfunctory affection which she had so much difficulty in constraining to meet the attacks made upon it by her mother’s designed malice.

“No,” she said. “Nothing has led me to the supposition : it is simply a last resource in an insoluble difficulty.”

Relief from intolerable fear took the form of anger in Mrs. Yorke’s breast.

“Then I would advise your keeping such

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far-fetched conclusions to yourself," she cried, irately, pushing Sylvia from her with a repellent gesture. "The world would laugh well at you if you informed it of your belief that a man would subject himself to the vilest calumny and disgrace, would forfeit the good opinion of his fellows, would pay the penalty of the ten best years of his life, would sacrifice his honor——"

"Stop! my father has never done that. His honor remains pure and unsullied, in the eyes of his daughter, at least."

"In the eyes of the daughter upon whom he has brought shame and disgrace!—the daughter whom, as your theory would have it, he sacrificed to some unknown being whose welfare he held to be of greater account than that of wife or child! There is but one sort of creature whose power over a man is great enough to induce such monstrous and wholesale sacrifice. Perhaps your precious speculations have hit upon such a one as the object of your father's self-surrender?"

A hot wave of shame dyed Sylvia's face as the vile insinuation fell from her mother's lips. One glance she cast at her, a glance so full of rebuke and intolerable disgust and aversion that, even in the throes of that ungovernable rage to which she had fallen prey, the woman winced, recognizing that she had gone too far

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in her attempts to ward off suspicion from herself ; then she dropped her crimson face into her open palms and turned aside, choking with indignation, suffocating beneath a sense of outraged modesty and wounded affection.

For a few moments there was perfect silence in the room. A horrible conflict was raging in Sylvia's heart. She felt herself to have been grossly insulted by the possibility her mother's words had implied ; her whole soul was in arms for her father's defence ; that weak affection which she had borne her mother, the result of propinquity and of the close relationship with one akin to her by birth alone, had received in this dastardly suggestion a blow from which it was doubtful if it would ever wholly recover. At the moment, the girl felt it had been quite done to death. She was too shocked, too embarrassed, too distressed in all her maidenly sensitiveness, to find it possible to meet her mother's glance. Could she ever again meet it ? she wondered, while her heart throbbed tumultuously and her veins seemed to run molten fire. Could she ever again live beneath the same roof with one who had so abominably aspersed her father to her ? Could she ever again pretend affection and respect for one who, even had there been grounds for such a theory as that most vile and untenable one, should have shielded her daughter from any

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suspicion of it, rather than have dangled it in all its revolting nakedness before her eyes?

And the pause gave Cynthia Yorke opportunity for self-communion. What a fool she had been to work the matter up to such a pitch! As usual, how inconsiderate of consequences her quick temper had been! Into what absolute vulgarity of suggestion she had allowed herself to be betrayed by a foolish child's romantic championship of her father's ruined cause! What harm could it have done to let her run the length of her tether? She could have gone no further. Sooner or later she must have come plump up against the blank wall presented by the fact that there was no possible culprit for whose sake Murray Van Vorst would have assumed so heavy a burden as that of disgrace and imprisonment. Presently she began to drum her fingers on the table. She felt the silence oppressive, and the stern rigidity of her daughter's figure made her nervous.

"Sylvia!" There was no response. Mrs. Yorke began to hum, half unconsciously, a refrain without words. It was a sort of nervous habit she had when especially moved or excited, and of all her little idiosyncrasies none, perhaps, was more annoying or irritating to Sylvia. As she hummed, she started on a

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vague and restless tour of the apartment, having no actual purpose to effect by her wandering, but being impelled to movement by a feeling of ungovernable impatience.

Finally, having failed by this means to allay the unquiet spirit that made repose impossible to her, she directed her steps to where Sylvia yet stood, immovable as a statue, still plunged in the bitter travail of soul into which that cruel hand, whose natural province it was to ward off suffering from her, even at the expense of wounds gained for itself in the endeavor, had deliberately and deceitfully betrayed her. So wholly preoccupied was the girl with her own grievous troubles, so profound was her wretched abstraction, that she was actually deaf to her mother's address. When, after a while, it was repeated at closer range, she started as if a pistol had been fired at her, and withdrew her hands from before her face, keeping that face, all disfigured and discolored by her tears and anguish, resolutely turned aside and downcast, that her eyes might not meet those which were regarding her with scant sympathy and cynical disfavor. It seemed to her as if all the surface of her body were a net-work of delicate nerves, and that these nerves were all alive and quivering. She shrank involuntarily from exposing them to further assault. But, though she could not bring herself to meet her mother's glance,

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she compelled her tongue to respond to her salutation.

"What is it?" she asked, in smothered tones, moving over to the window where lay her abandoned work.

"You are acting like a little fool! You boasted just now of being a woman: I had thought you able to confront such unpleasant matters as all women must regard sooner or later. What if your father had relations outside the legitimate bounds of his home? Other men, highly esteemed and honored, have the same. It is no singular or exceptional thing for men to assume such. And if he sacrificed himself to shield a creature who proved herself by crime unworthy even illegitimate regard, why,"—she paused and shrugged her thin shoulders expressively; then, with a short laugh, continued,—“it scarcely becomes me, in the position of a wronged wife, to say it, perhaps, yet it might be fairly considered an act of heroism on his part.”

This had been the outcome of her perambulations about the room, the sop to her daughter's wounded feelings engendered by cogitation.

Sylvia, over by the window, had been busy-ing herself in gathering together her shining silks and folding up her work. She dropped everything with an abrupt movement, as her

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mother concluded, and, with a quick, resolute stride, she swept again across the room, until she stood at her mother's side. With a sudden, impetuous action, she threw out her hands, and laid one on either shoulder of the woman before her, constraining her to meet her glance by a certain irresistible force that manifested itself in her actions. Her own eyes were keen, penetrating, inquisitorial, no longer the eyes of a stricken and humiliated girl, but those of a determined judge bent upon wresting the truth from a witness at all costs.

"Mother," she said, in quick, ringing accents, "you have done a despicable and atrocious thing. You have vilified my father ; you have attacked his morality in a spot where I never dreamed of looking for a blemish ; you have planted in my heart the first doubt of his integrity that has ever found lodging there. For the first time it has occurred to me that, instead of being a hero and martyr, he may be, in point of fact, a sinner. You have crucified my love and esteem for him, but they yet live. It lies with you either to restore them to their full strength, or to kill them outright ; and one of these two things you shall do now—this moment. Is there truth in what your words implied, or were they a mean calumny ? Answer me : had they any foundation whatever, or had they not ? Speak ! You must and shall."

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At that very instant the door opened, and a servant appeared. But Sylvia paid him no heed. Her gaze never quitted its hold upon that of her mother. All the power of her stronger character was compelling the truth from those thin, drawn lips. She gave the sharp shoulders a little shake.

"Speak!" she ordered, "or nod your head. Were they true or not? Yes or no?"

And, like a subject yielding to hypnotic suggestion, Cynthia Yorke shook her head mechanically, muttering at the same time, below her breath, almost automatically,—

"No : they were not true."

Sylvia let go her hold as if she had discovered that she was clasping an adder. The movement was expressive of a scorn and contempt too great for words. With a certain degree of recovered composure on her face, not wholly a look of peace and tranquillity, but an expression far different from that of awful anguish and despair which had so recently characterized it, she turned her back upon her mother and accosted the servant.

"What is it, Jaynes?" she asked.

"Mr. Yorke has sent down word as he wishes to see you, immijate, Miss Yorke."

"Very well. I will go to him at once." And, without another glance at her mother, she followed the man from the room.



CHAPTER VI.

OLD Samuel Yorke certainly looked more like an impersonation of Age hovering at the gate of Death than anything else. As Sylvia entered the chamber, the trained nurse rose from her seat and bowed respectfully to her. Then, after an unimportant word or two, she passed out of the room, leaving the two together.

Sylvia at once approached the bed. She was surprised to see that her grandfather was not lying quite recumbent according to his usual habit, but was bolstered up into almost a sitting posture. His gaunt, lean frame was supported by many pillows, and his eyes, beneath very long and shaggy brows, gleamed forth from their sunken sockets eager and alert with the fires of purpose and mental activity. Upon a table by the bed stood writing paraphernalia, and it at once occurred to the girl that she had been sent for to fulfil the duties of amanuensis. It was the first time she had

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ever been called upon to render such service, for prior to the illness which had laid him so low the old man had been vigorous and well preserved, amply qualified to attend personally to his correspondence and affairs. He had learned, at some cost, the lesson of retaining control of his own investments, and since acquiring that lesson he had laid it to heart.

Sylvia leaned over the bed and pressed her lips to the parchment-like brow.

"Dear granny," she said, "how do you feel to-day?"

The old man gave a grunt.

"Oh, so-so, so-so, my dear,—about as well as I shall ever feel again in this world, I suppose." His words came slowly and spasmodically. His breathing was much affected by disease, and this rendered his utterance jerky and rough.

Light had been in large measure excluded from the room, and the semi-darkness and his own failing vision prevented Mr. Yorke from perceiving the signs of recent emotion on Sylvia's face. He remarked a certain tremulousness and strain in her voice, however, for it was this organ alone which had made any melody in his life, and he knew its variations as a connoisseur of violins knows the notes and vibrations of a cherished instrument. He grasped her hand and drew her to him, peer-

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ing into her sweet, disturbed face as it neared his own.

"Has she been at you again, pussy?" he jerked forth, in tones which the girl knew were intended to imply tenderness, but which sounded only a little harsher and more raucous than usual.

She nodded with assumed carelessness.

"Yes; we have had a little tiff, but it's all over now," she replied.

The old man looked inquiringly at her.

"What about?" he questioned. "Steenie?" She shook her head.

"Oh, no; nothing in particular," she returned, as if dismissing the subject. "It isn't worth talking about. Now, what can I do for you, dear granny? It looks as if there were letters to be written,"—with a glance at the table.

"Yes,—one; but an important one. I could ask no one but you to write it, Sylvie. It won't take you long, child, and I think it will be a labor of love to you, in more ways than one."

All his sentences were disjointed and the words expelled as if with great effort.

Sylvia smiled. She attached but one meaning to his words.

"Anything I can do for you, granny dear, is sure to be that," she remarked, tenderly.

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It was wonderful to see how the harsh rigidity of the old man's countenance relaxed beneath the gentle influence of the girl's affectionate demonstrativeness. It seemed as if a soft hand had passed over his features, smoothing them out and leaving an expression almost of peace upon them.

"Sylvie," he said, "I'm pretty near the edge of the grave. There won't be many to regret me much when I fall over the brink ; and I don't wonder. I'm thought to be a hard man, pussy, and a tight one, and there's some truth in what people think of me. It don't trouble me much what folks in general think, but there are one or two I'd like to make a little apology and explanation to before I go. You're one of them."

The girl, deeply touched, for such a show of feeling was most unusual in the old man, leaned forward and laid her fresh young cheek against his withered one.

"Dear grandpapa," she whispered, "there is no need for that. You know I love you."

Again the rugged outlines of the old face softened with pleasure.

"Yes, I believe it," the laboring voice acquiesced ; "but I'd like you to understand me a little, as well. I've had a hard time of it, pussy, all my life. I began with a step-mother who kept me and my father pretty tight under

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her thumb. I married a woman who was a she—well, I won't speak harshly of your grandmother, Sylvie. I had a daughter who has always been a thorn in my side, who has no more——" His voice was growing thick and indistinct with rising passion. A touch that Sylvia laid upon his hand recalled him to a recollection of whom he was addressing. "Ah, I forgot," he continued, weakly, "you are her daughter. We will let her pass. I had a son-in-law whom I liked, and who seemed devoted to my interests. He—ah, I forgot again; he is your father." He stopped short, panting, his breath coming in quick, short gasps which much distressed Sylvia. After a moment, he went on. "You see I cannot justify myself to you, pussy; it is not possible to do it; and yet, my little Sylvie, it is not wholly my own fault that I am dying here without one soul, except a poor little tender-hearted girl, to regret me when I am gone."

It was inexpressibly pathetic and moving, this plaint wrung from lips that had gone through a long existence making no moan, asking no consideration. The sadness of it, the revelation of a longing for love and sympathy and comprehension which even she, who of all the world cared most for him, had never suspected, touched Sylvia deeply. Quick tears sprang to her eyes and stole down her cheeks.

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She took the old man's hands in hers, and laid them upon her breast, as she sat beside him on the bed, regarding him with fond surprise and commiseration.

It is singular what strangers we are to those whom we fancy we know most intimately,—how we may live days, months, and years, a lifetime, indeed, cheek by jowl with another, feeling ourselves familiar with his every thought and with all the impulses that govern his actions, believing that we are thoroughly acquainted with all the peculiarities of his temperament, when, of a sudden, some trifling event occurs, and, behold, we stand aghast at our own misconception of a character which, revealed under new conditions in its real aspect, astounds us with strange and hitherto unexhibited phases.

Wonderingly, self-reproachfully,—for, though she had been in his own peculiar way her grandfather's pet, there had never been much overt manifestation of tenderness between them, and she recognized now, at the eleventh hour, that he would have appreciated and valued such,—Sylvia sat gazing with wistful eyes at the wrinkled face, and fondling the shrunken hands between her soft palms. She had not much to say, passionately as she longed to respond to that hitherto dumb spirit of natural affection which had found such tardy expression in the old man's breast · for the habits of

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a lifetime do not yield easily to fresh conditions, and, in spite of his indulgence to her, old Mr. Yorke had ever held his granddaughter at arm's length. But her blue eyes were warm and loving as they brooded over his face, and the sweet sympathy manifest in her look perhaps said as much to the dying man as volumes of protest could have done.

He seemed to fall into a stupor, or fit of reflection, as they sat thus. His eyes were closed, and Sylvia could not divine whether he slept or was simply given over to retrospection. She sat quite still, except for that soothing movement with which she stroked the wasted hands. Presently he lifted his lids, and she saw from the alert look he cast upon her that his faculties had not been slumbering.

"Pussy," he said, "before I die I am going to do something which I think will please you. Can you guess what it is?"

The girl pondered a moment. There were but two matters of consequence to her in which she believed her grandfather's interference could be of real avail. The greater of these, the restoration of her father to his home, she dismissed at once as outside the bounds of possibility. The other, the discharge from prison of the old sewing-woman, Martha Melton, and her reinstatement in the house-

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hold, an achievement to which she had often begged her grandfather to apply his energies and influence, came more within the realms of the probable. Therefore, with a gleam of expectancy and joy in her eyes, she suggested this conjecture. But Samuel Yorke shook his head, while a grim smile played about the corners of his mouth.

"No ; better than that," he chuckled. "Guess again."

The old man's failing senses were not very acute, but even he could detect the nervous trembling of the fingers that clasped his own. The girl dared not express that other long-cherished wish. She knew how fiercely in bygone days the mere mention of her father's name had wrought upon her grandfather ; and now, when agitation might bring immediate dissolution in its train, she feared to excite him. One other desire, strongly opposed by her mother, lay near her heart, but she had never considered her grandfather's influence as likely to be a co-operative agent in the attainment of this. However, being without other resource, she mentioned it.

"Steenie?" she murmured, doubtfully.

The old man chuckled again.

"No ; neither Martha nor Steenie," he ejaculated, with grim satisfaction. "Isn't there some one else you have worried and

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fretted about far longer than you have about these two? Hey?—what say?"

For now a rare glow had come over the girl's face; her hands had stilled their motions and clasped themselves over the fleshless fingers resting upon her throbbing breast; and, bashfully, as a maiden might mention a lover's name, a single word dropped falteringly from her lips:

"Papa!"

Old Yorke nodded. "Yes, that's right; your father," he whispered. "See those writing-things yonder, Sylvie? I want you to write a letter to him for me. I want him to come here and see me."

There was no word from her at this: some crises do not permit of speech, and Sylvia's heart was too full for expression. She did not pause to ask herself what this might mean, for what reason her father's prosecutor desired his presence by his death-bed, or what new development had led to this recall. It was enough for her that the man who had banished Murray Van Vorst from beneath his roof, who had consigned him to a living death, who had disgraced him in the eyes of all men, summoned him again to his side before his soul set forth on its pilgrimage to eternity.

With a look of awed and solemn joy, she slid from her position on the bed to her knees

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beside it and pressed her lips to the hands that had dropped from her breast. Then she hid her face for a moment in the snowy coverings, and when she lifted it again it appeared to the eyes of the old man like the faces of the cherubim, so radiant and glowing was it. He motioned to the table.

"Now, write," he said, and he spoke with increasing difficulty, so that Sylvia grew alarmed, fearing that her agitation had reacted upon him; and she hastened to obey his wishes, imposing great control upon herself as she wrote.

It was a brief letter; merely a courteous request, without explanation of any motive which might prompt it, that, at his earliest convenience, Van Vorst would do the subscriber the very great favor of calling upon him.

"Shall I sign it, grandpapa, or will you do so?" asked Sylvia, as she wrote the last word with lingering care.

The old man raised his right hand and contemplated it. It shook as if palsied.

"No; sign my name, 'by Sylvia;' perhaps that will induce him to come," he said.

She signed it as he bade her, and addressed an envelope. Into this she was about to slip the note, when he stayed her with a quick gesture.

"Pussy," he said, halting between each

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word, for his breathing was growing more and more labored, as the unusual exertion told by degrees upon the feeble remnant of strength that yet remained to him, "let me look at it. I would like to see what manner of hand you write, child. I believe I have never seen your writing."

She humored him, holding the note, with its firm, clear calligraphy, close to his eyes. He glanced at it, nodding in commendation of its legibility, and, though the room was dim, easily possessing himself of its contents, for from him had Cynthia inherited the myopic vision whose reward is prolonged strength in advancing age, and he had never had recourse to spectacles to repair the deficiencies of waning eyesight.

His glance was about to drop, pleased and satisfied, from the paper, when it suddenly became arrested by the signature. A thrill of recovered energy, caused by intense surprise, passed through him. He started from his pillows, and seized the little sheet in his shaking fingers, bringing it even closer to his eyes than Sylvia had held it. Thus scrutinizing it, he cried out an order to her in a harsh, peremptory tone.

"Lift up that curtain, child!" he shouted. And, as she obeyed, "Who taught you to write my name like this?" he asked, with such

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violence that the girl grew terrified, believing that sudden delirium had seized him.

"Why, no one, dear grandpapa," she returned, soothingly. "I have always written like that ; it is my natural hand."

He glared at her a moment from beneath his overhanging eyebrows, with such fierce penetration in his look that she became strengthened in her conviction that he had gone suddenly mad, and set about planning a means of diverting him so that she might escape from the room and summon the nurse. But before she could frame a pretext he again accosted her.

"It is your father's hand," he said. "Did he teach you to write?"

"Yes," she responded, still with her mind on a way of escape.

He paused, gazing intently at the paper he continued to hold, which made a little crackling noise as it wavered in his unsteady grasp. Sylvia took advantage of his preoccupation to steal noiselessly toward the bell ; but before she had traversed half the distance the harsh voice recalled her.

"Come here, girl," he cried. "I'm not done with you yet." He halted again, but, as she stood once more beside him, he raised his eyes and shot into hers a glance so sharp and inquisitorial that it might have detected

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subterfuge in the heart of a millstone. "Do you form all your letters as he did?" the old man asked, the words issuing singly, like gasps, from his twitching lips.

Sylvia shook her head.

"No," she said, thinking with what strange suddenness this delirium had overtaken him, and a little shaken by the consideration that the wish to see her father, which she had penned at his dictation, had probably been but a precursor of this frenzied behavior.

"What difference is there?"

"I could never form a capital Y or V as he did," she replied.

He grasped her hand, drawing her to him with such strength and fervor that she was impelled to hold back, fearing him.

"Did he ever employ you to write my name?" he muttered, with deliberate and significant emphasis on each word. And at that question a glimmer of light began to illuminate her grandfather's strange conduct, setting it in more rational proportions before the girl's mind.

"No," she answered, gravely, desisting now from planning further stratagem for evasion.

"No," she repeated, "never."

He looked piercingly at her.

"It is too far back," he breathed: "you cannot remember."

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"I can," she replied, with decision. "I can recall every circumstance relating to my lessons with him."

He reflected an instant, and the sound of his labored respiration was alone audible in the chamber. Then he looked up at her again, this time even more insistently and searchingly than before.

"Did any one ever employ you to write it?" he asked.

Again she shook her head.

"No one," she answered.

"You are sure?"

"Quite sure," she replied; but this time there was less decision than before in her response. Her devotion to her father's memory had kept alive within her all the most trifling incidents and circumstances of their abruptly ended companionship. She felt absolute reliance upon the fidelity of her recollections as they concerned him; but the fact was, regarding other persons and events her memory was more treacherous. She had often proved its unreliability upon points of minor consideration; so now she spoke with less conviction.

The old man dropped back upon his pillows, spent and exhausted. Sylvia, alarmed by his appearance, sought to dissuade him from allowing his thoughts to dwell further upon the subject, but he gave no sign that he had even

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heard her words. She stood in indecision beside him, and presently asked if he would allow her to call the nurse, that she might administer some restorative. But he stretched out his hand and clutched her dress, showing that he wished her to remain where she was.

The sight of the wan and haggard face, with its skin like ancient parchment, over which the forbidding ghastliness of approaching dissolution seemed even now stealing; the stertorous breathing, so significant of the supreme effort of a failing heart to perform its functions yet a little while longer; the gray, grisly light of the chamber; the suggestion of a presence, invisible but awful, pervading the atmosphere,—all these made a strong demand upon the courage of the girl, who had never before come within even the shadow of death. She shivered a little, and, had one of sensitive hearing been there, such might have detected a sound like the modified clicking of castanets, as her teeth chattered against each other. But she was of stout heart, and one whom she loved, in the hour of his greatest need, required her. She had no thought of forsaking her post.

Her grandfather had closed his eyes as he sank back into his pillows. Now, watching intently, Sylvia saw the heavy lids open. He fixed her with his glance, and then, raising a

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tremulous arm, pointed to a mahogany secretary that stood across the room, between two windows.

"Go there," he directed, with great effort. "The second drawer. In a Russia case—you will—find—papers. Yellow slips—checks. Bring—them—here."

Sylvia leaned beseechingly toward him.

"Dear grandpapa," she entreated, "never mind now. You are too weak. Let it go till by and by, I beg of you."

But he waved her impatiently away.

"I have work to do now," he gasped. "There will be no by and by for me. Go!"

And, so commanded, she reluctantly obeyed. The secretary was an old-fashioned affair, with a bookcase above and desk below. Under the desk were three drawers adorned with curiously wrought handles of antique brass. The second drawer Sylvia opened, and, according to directions, took from it a sort of wallet of Russia leather, marked with her grandfather's initials in gilded characters. She remembered the wallet perfectly; she had herself given it to her grandfather many years ago, for a Christmas present, and its familiar aspect awoke lively reminiscences within her. She had no time to indulge in these, however, with that grisly presence stalking so threateningly toward

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him in whose service she was engaged, and she quickly opened the case in search of those slips which her grandfather desired.

Her heart beat fast, horribly fast. It seemed to rise into her throat and choke her, as she considered what, in all probability, those bits of paper were, and what bitter anguish and suffering they had caused, and what justice might yet be wrought had they the power of speech. She had no difficulty in finding them, for nothing else encumbered the wallet. Four small, oblong strips of thin, yellowish paper, soiled and defaced by contact with many hands, were the sole contents of the case.

Her hands trembled as she withdrew these from their hiding-place, and her fingers held them distastefully, for she regarded them with much the same aversion with which the child of one executed might regard the instrument that had orphaned him. As she drew them forth, an imperious mandate from the bed hastened her reluctant movements :

“Hurry ! There is scant time.”

She dropped the wallet back into the drawer, and hastily returned to her grandfather. To him she gave the checks.

He took them with eager fingers, and slipped them apart from each other into a sort of fan-shaped arrangement. Then, with a strong effort, he raised himself erect in bed, his tall,

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gaunt frame showing its angular proportions beneath his night-shirt. He held the checks out toward Sylvia, with such wonderful control of his muscles that the slips waved scarcely at all in his grasp.

"Look," he ordered, "look at these! Have—you—ever—seen—these—before?"

A terrible gray pallor was spreading from the old man's chin to his brow. A pinched look was already sharpening his features. He was fast draining the feeble amount of reserve strength that, less prodigally employed, might have extended his existence for some days yet. All the conserved energy of his being was in the compelling gaze with which his eyes sought to constrain his granddaughter.

She, poor child, had no suspicion of the awful foreboding which consumed him, and which he was requiring her either to confirm or dispel. Little did she suspect, being again convinced that this strange conduct was the result of aberration, that in fulfilling his apparently simple request to examine those small bits of paper she was in reality grasping the hilt of a dagger with which she must inflict irremediable wounds upon both him and herself. Her one and only concern was to humor his mood, and, by so doing, restore him to calmness and composure. Although she knew little of illness, she yet felt assured how exceed-

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ingly injurious such unusual excitement must be.

She leaned down until she might perfectly discern the characters upon the small slips. She had thought one brief glance would be sufficient to allow her truthfully to reply that never before had she beheld them. But as her eyes fell upon the faces of the checks, which had hitherto been unobserved by her, a change, quickly noted by that intent gaze which was riveted upon her, passed over her countenance. Involuntarily, forgetful of the dire need for caution and self-restraint, she stretched out her hand and grasped the shrunken wrist upraised before her. Lifting it unconsciously, for now the condition of her grandfather no longer held pre-eminence in her mind, she brought the withered hand, with its sheaf of checks, up to the level of her eyes.

Suddenly all the chambers of memory seemed unlocked to her inspection. Trivial deeds long forgotten, trifling actions too unimportant to be consciously retained, simple occupations, passing amusements, methods of whiling away the long hours of a dreary day, childish employments that at the time had made but faint impression,—all these hazy recollections, scrupulously garnered by that wonderful storehouse which carefully preserves all sorts and kinds of mental lumber, came

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clearly before her, opened up to her vision by a few familiar characters traced upon four not over-clean scraps of discolored paper.

How vividly she recalled the various occasions upon which she had filled in those blanks ! It had been a matter of such pride to her to make a faithful imitation of the copy placed before her. She had ruined several of the little slips before satisfactorily accomplishing the result ; but that had been of no consequence, for there was plenty to draw upon in that little red copy-book from which she had been supplied. She had agreed not to mention the matter to her father, as it was understood that when she had wholly overcome her difficulty with the Y's and the V's, and had made a really faithful transcription, it was to be presented to him as a pleasant and gratifying surprise. He would be so delighted, she had been assured, to see that she could write his name and her grandfather's just as well as he did. But, alas ! the presentation had never taken place. Before the troublesome letters were satisfactorily conquered, her father had been taken from her ; and there the matter, so far as she was concerned, had ended. Greater events, an enduring and heart-breaking trouble, had routed such small considerations from her recollection ; and, as the little red book had in some way disappeared, her fruitless endeavors

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to conquer the rebellious characters sank into oblivion.

She was dreamily dwelling upon all this, wrapped in contemplation of that memory-conjuring sheaf, when a very peculiar sound struck upon her ear and scattered the blinding mists of retrospection. She glanced quickly at the pillows whence the sound had proceeded, and at the same instant let go her grasp of the shrivelled wrist, which fell, heavy and inert, to the bed. With a loud cry, she started forward, for there was a terrible and awe-inspiring look upon her grandfather's face. She would have thought it the face of a dead man, but for the gleaming, agonized eyes, which still retained their hold upon her countenance.

"Grandpapa ! Oh, grandpapa, do you hear me?"

Only a slight flicker of the lashes responded to the question. Then the jaw, which had already fallen, regained control of its muscles, and the vocal cords were strung by the still masterful will for one final effort. It was a hollow but perfectly distinct utterance that issued from the drawn lips, a question emphasized by the unconquerable determination to know, in this supreme moment, the truth the whole truth, and nothing but the truth.

"Who—wrote—those—checks?"

Like an automaton the girl replied, "I did."

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“Who—instigated—you—to—do—it?”

The final word was scarcely audible. It was little more than a faint rattle, but the dread and apprehension in the expiring eyes were terrible.

Like a flash of lightning cleaving a midnight darkness that has obscured and concealed actual things from view, swift intelligence descended upon Sylvia's mind. An awful look of horror, the shrinking together of all her tender sensibilities, the absolute impossibility of contemplating such a revelation as this that she had suddenly discovered, played miserable havoc with the gentle, girlish beauty of her face. She crouched over the bed; it was as if her knees refused to support her frame. She quivered and shook and trembled from head to foot. Her lips were parched, her throat was dry, her eyes seemed to burn and scorch their sockets.

This could not be! Oh, no, *no*! Such a thing were impossible! Her grandfather was wandering, mad, insane! It was a death-bed delusion, the hideous fancy of a diseased brain! And then it came over her with convincing suggestiveness that she herself had testified to the truth of this awful thing; that this was no maggot of a decayed intelligence, but the pure germ of truth itself, of positive knowledge, which had lain for years undeveloped within her own mind.

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And then, even there in the sacred presence of Death, the girl gave a dreadful cry, that rang loudly through the chamber and caused pity, the pity of Age about to enter into rest for Youth in the stress of battle, to mingle with the anguish of the fast-glazing eyes.

"My mother!" she cried; "oh, no, no! Granny, not my mother!"

She fell beside the bed, crushed by this horror that had descended upon her. The feeble fingers of the old man twitched and made an attempt to creep toward her bowed head. Muscular action was no longer to be commanded, however. The broad, emaciated chest heaved with a long, indrawn breath; and then a faint little sound which conveys unmistakable meaning to accustomed ears was emitted from the throat. After this, all was still.

Mrs. Yorke was passing up the staircase at the head of which her father's apartments were situated, on her way to Sylvia's room, just as the girl's cry broke from her lips. She had been sitting in the library where her daughter had left her, considering how best she could propitiate the girl and wheedle her out of this whim about her father. She had finally concluded that it was necessary, in order to accomplish this desideratum, to make some concessions, and, by indulging her wishes upon

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another matter, wean her mind from contemplation of this. Therefore she had resolved to abandon her opposition to Stephen Lennox for the time being, and to permit an engagement to be formed between him and Sylvia. It must not be supposed that, for a moment, she dreamed of considering a marriage between the two. This engagement was to be merely a temporary affair, which she would bring to a conclusion just as soon as Sylvia's attention should be diverted by it from this fad about her father ; which would doubtless be as soon as Murray Van Vorst was safely out of the way in those foreign climes which she had discovered he purposed visiting.

The unusual sound arrested her attention and awoke her alarm, and she at once directed her steps toward that chamber from which she had been rigidly excluded during her father's illness. She paused an instant on the threshold, with the door-knob in her hand, a little fearful what entrance into the room might reveal to her ; then she turned the handle unceremoniously, and passed in.

Her first glance discovered Sylvia fallen by the bedside ; her ears were oppressed by the peculiar stillness of the apartment, and her mind at once leaped to a partially correct conclusion as to what had happened. She suspected that her father had died, and that the



A shiver, quick and sharp, ran through her as she met her mother's glance.

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shock of his death had prostrated the girl. She moved rapidly forward, and, before she had advanced many steps, confirmed by a single look her suspicions regarding her father. Her attention was next bestowed upon Sylvia.

She had reached her side, and was about to bend over her with a view to discovering if indeed she had fainted, when the girl raised her head slowly and glanced up to see who the intruder might be. The face of the dead was a parallel in whiteness to hers, but the awful misery that marked her every feature found no counterpart in the serenity which was already settling over the lifeless countenance that lay at rest upon its pillow.

A shiver, quick and sharp, ran through her as she met her mother's glance. Then she rose and stood by the bedside, gazing mutely down upon her grandfather's tranquil face.

Believing her still influenced by their late contention (for she was a woman who could herself preserve resentment through all contingencies), Mrs. Yorke accosted her rather sharply, for she saw now that the girl was in perfect command of her senses.

"What caused this, Sylvia?" she asked, in a tone which, though conventionally hushed, was yet acrid. "When did it happen?"

Sylvia turned very slowly and deliberately from her contemplation of that rigid mask.

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upturned upon the pillow, and, leaning down, unbent the long fingers of the old man's right hand and took from between them four narrow slips of discolored paper. These she held out, so that even the deficient vision of Cynthia Yorke could not fail to recognize them.

"These," she said, in a dull, passionless monotone, applying her mother's question to the final extinction of that filial love and esteem and confidence which she had tried so laboriously to keep alive, and neglecting all reference to so small a matter as the mere passing from earth of an aged and weary spirit. Then she added, "Ten years ago : do you not remember?"

She raised her eyes suddenly, and opened her white lids full upon her mother. For the first time in her life a sick misery stole into the heart of Cynthia Yorke. This girl, whose eyes so accused, scorned, upbraided, contemned, despised her, was her daughter, and, after all, in her own fashion, and to the limited degree of which her nature was capable, she loved her.

She threw out her hands, with an impulse of appeal and remonstrance ; but Sylvia, if she saw it, did not heed the gesture. She had turned her back upon her mother, and was already leaving the chamber. After the door closed behind her, Cynthia stood for some

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moments gazing fixedly at it, as if she could project her sight beyond it and follow Sylvia's movements to their conclusion.

For the first time in her life she was beginning to feel that her past conduct had not been guided by a far-seeing wisdom. An incipient regret for what she called, not sin, nor wickedness, but bygone follies, began to assail her. The presence of death awoke within her a hollow, dreary consciousness that there was something for every living soul to confront besides the success or failure of mere worldly ambitions. That look which Sylvia had turned upon her discouraged any hope she might have cherished that her image occupied a niche in her daughter's regard or affection.

Remorse, even of a selfish nature, was not wont to afflict her, however ; nor did she allow herself long to entertain it now. She roused herself presently, with the comforting reflection that she had a staff beside her, potent to carry her through all emergencies. Her hand mechanically wandered to her *châtelaine*.

After that she went over to the bell and rang it. When the nurse appeared, she informed her of Mr. Yorke's death, and instructed her to attend to all the necessary details pertaining to it.

Then she retired to her own apartments.



CHAPTER VII.

HALF an hour later, Sylvia came out of her room and went down-stairs, with slow, mechanical movements, which seemed rather the result of past deliberation than the fulfilment of present intention. She moved as if in a trance, and beneath the veil of black chiffon which obscured her features her face wore an expression of wretched preoccupation and introspection. She was dressed to go out, and on entering the drawing-room she went directly to the bell and rang it. After a little delay the butler appeared.

“I want a cab, Jaynes,” she said; “at once.”

The man hesitated. It shocked his ideas of propriety that his young mistress should be going out immediately upon the death of her grandfather. Perhaps she was yet ignorant of the event.

“Yes, miss,” he replied, adding, “Did you know, miss, that——”

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Sylvia interrupted him sharply, which surprised and distressed him, for she was in general what he called "hexceedingly haffable" to those who served her.

"I know everything," said she. The man, departing at once to do her bidding, had little suspicion how much ground her widely comprehensive statement covered.

While his daughter was restlessly pacing up and down the luxurious drawing-room of her grandfather's house, awaiting the coming of the cab, Murray Van Vorst was sitting before his desk in the comfortable but exceedingly plain and unadorned suite of apartments which he had engaged immediately upon leaving prison. He had grown so accustomed to severity in his surroundings that sumptuousness and superfluity of detail in furnishing oppressed and troubled him. The fittings of the room were adequate and nothing more, significant of good taste and an unconstrained pocket-book, but suggestive also of quiet habits and a shrinking from mere show and self-indulgence.

He had been writing letters, but had apparently finished, for the inkstand was covered, the pen dried, and the blotter pushed back to make room for an ash-tray. He was lounging back in his chair, half turned from the desk, with one arm resting carelessly upon it, and his eyes were fixed indifferently upon that point

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where they had chanced to fall, which happened to be a strip of gilt cornice-moulding that divided wall from ceiling. It was evident that he was deep in thought, and those vertical lines between his brows were even more pronounced than on the day when he had bidden the kindly warden farewell. Only himself and his Creator knew what he had been through during these weeks since he had received his discharge. When he compared the torture endured under freedom with what he had considered such under imprisonment, he laughed derisively at himself for having thought the latter the extreme of martyrdom.

Why, he had been in a comfortable condition of mind during those ten years! No lash of veiled insult had been applied to him; no thumb-screw of unwilling toleration of his society had caused him to wince and quiver beneath its intolerable pangs; no scourge of patronizing protection from individuals whom he thirsted to kick out of his sight had flayed his pride and patience. Even in the drear midst of the profound solitude of his convict-life he had never experienced such an awful sense of isolation as overwhelmed him here in the throng and multitude with which he freely mingled. Set apart from humanity though he had been for ten endlessly passing years, yet he had never comprehended the meaning of

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the word ostracism until he had returned, and had been admitted, through the powerful mediation of one determined ally, into semi-association with his fellows.

For the good offices of Charlotte Pendexter (and as her name passed through his mind, he removed the cigar from between his lips, like one who would not profane, even indirectly, a holy shrine) had never secured to him more than this. He had been received on sufferance, as the *protégé* of a woman so highly circumstanced as to be a sort of social dictator, whose decisions as to the merits of an aspirant were apt to be final in the opinion of her world. No man of his old set had come forward and welcomed him with honest and hearty expressions of gladness at recovering him as a friend ; no man among his new acquaintances had offered to put him up at a club, or had invited him to join a party composed exclusively of his own sex.

It had been women who had taken him up, and who would have petted and made much of him, had he permitted it ; for women are singularly inconsequent and illogical in matters of honor, and, while they scorn and denounce with bitterest rancor the poor and pitiful wretch who purloins inconsiderable amounts to satisfy some desperate need or to relieve some otherwise hopeless exigency, they (sweet, sympa-

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thetic souls !) will condone and extenuate a gigantic crime of the most outrageous and abominable character, so be it its perpetrator is bold and engaging.

Van Vorst was not a man to be content with the support of women and the freely proffered adhesion of that class of emasculated drones which buzzed noisily about him, attracted by the excessive supply of that coveted nectar with which a past generation of busy bees had so inordinately endowed him. Had not the queen-bee herself, that loyal, trusting, beautiful woman who alone had made his resurrection supportable to him, lighted upon his very soul in a manner that made it, notwithstanding all other circumstances, a matter of almost impossible exertion to dislodge her hold, he long since would have retreated from an intolerable position, and would have sought to begin a new life, or, at least, to conclude an old one, in a land where his name did not carry with it a suggestion of crime and felony. During the hours that had intervened between the present moment and that painful and memorable interview which had taken place between himself, his former wife, and Charlotte Pendexter, his mind had dwelt upon it, and now his thoughts were busy considering it.

Good God ! could women of such widely opposite types be creatures of the same species ?

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How plainly indicated in the appearance, manner, intonation, ay, in the very bearing, of the two, were their respective temperaments and habits of thought and life ! Until that moment he had not beheld Cynthia Yorke for ten years, and he marvelled at the decay of what had once been more than average beauty.

There had been little harmony or peace in their married life. She had fallen desperately in love with him and had married him out of hand, for even in girlhood she had been possessed of ungovernable impulses and an imperious temper. He had been a comparatively poor man at that time ; but old Yorke had liked him, and waived his want of means for the sake of that peace which was obtainable only by the indulgence of his daughter's caprices. Besides this, even then, the nimbus of great prospective riches encircled Van Vorst's head. But his acquisition of this wealth depended upon the strength or frailty of an exceedingly prudent and well-preserved old dame, Murray's step-grandmother, to whom a life-use of it had been bequeathed, who had always detested her step-children and their offspring (of whom Murray alone lived to maturity), and who maintained no communication of any sort with him, much less afforded him pecuniary assistance.

Old Mr. Yorke had been, notwithstanding

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his reputation for penuriousness, liberal enough with the young couple. The allowance he made them, in the shape of a salary paid Murray for taking charge of his affairs, would have sufficed to maintain them even luxuriously, had Cynthia been other than she was. Owing to her thriftlessness, however, the household was eternally in debt; her extravagance was absolutely ruinous, and her continual demands upon an exchequer that her own extortions kept barren soon robbed her husband of patience and forbearance. Money, money, money! This was the theme of every *tête-à-tête* between them; and the jingle of coin was the accompaniment to which the refrain of "Home, Sweet Home" was forever set in his mind.

How well he remembered that scene which had taken place between his wife and himself when he had gone, hot from the charge his father-in-law had brought against him, to prove if his own suspicions had lighted upon the real culprit! He had not suspected Cynthia without cause. He had been much disturbed for some time concerning the source from which she drew the abundance of ready money with which her depleted purse suddenly appeared to be furnished. To all his questions regarding it she had returned evasive answers. Like an inspiration, while that charge was

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being preferred against him, the truth had revealed itself to him.

He recalled the shame and shrinking with which he had contemplated the necessity of revealing to her the fact that he had discovered her guilt. The brief journey from his father-in-law's study to his wife's chamber had been to him a *via dolorosa*, set with conflicting emotions ; for, though there was little real love in his heart for Cynthia, yet he pitied her for the anguish she must endure when she should stand revealed before her husband a felon and forger. With the conviction of her guilt had also come to him the impulse of self-sacrifice. This woman whom he had married must, at all cost to himself, be shielded from the consequences of her own sin. That had been one of the tacitly implied obligations of his marriage-oath. He had taken upon himself the duty of guarding her honor as well as her person, of protecting her in every possible way from shame and disaster. Judging her in a degree by himself, although familiarity and experience had taught him how short she usually fell of his standards, he believed that he should have much difficulty in persuading her to allow him to assume the burden of her guilt. But, as a sort of fungous growth of sudden affection sprang rapidly into being within his heart, generated by an immense

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pity for her afflicted womanhood, he grew fiercely resolute in his determination to force her to permit him to become her scapegoat.

He had broken the news of discovery to her in the gentlest, most considerate way. Long years had intervened since he had manifested such tenderness to her. He took her in his arms and held her to his heart, turning his own head aside that her stricken spirit should not be needlessly mortified by the necessity of meeting his glance. Before disclosing his errand he had been at pains to assure her of his love, to dwell upon the fact that nothing short of death itself should be allowed to come between them, that it was a husband's privilege as well as his duty to interpose his own person as a shield between danger and the woman he had sworn to protect. And then, cautiously, gently, with due regard for that delicate sensibility which long intimacy with her coarser nature had not taught him absolutely to lose faith in, he told her what had happened, revealed to her the wretched truth, assuming her guilt and implying it as he spoke.

And how had she met the revelation? A hard and bitter expression came into his face now, as he dwelt upon the way in which she had conducted herself. She had pushed him

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from her with angry force ; she had denied the accusation with flaming eyes and indignant bearing ; she had reviled him with the coarse invective of a fishwife, had flouted his proposals with scorn and contumely, protesting her own innocence, and jeering at those tender offers of protection he had made her in such good faith.

But her resentment and assumption of wounded dignity were overdone. The lady betrayed herself by over-protestation. There was a false ring beneath her wrathful refutation, the ring of a guilty fear and terror, the suppressed but still apparent apprehensiveness of a criminal who suddenly discovers his crime detected. Besides this, Van Vorst was in possession of a fact which, in his sight, was a damning bit of evidence against her ; and when her assumed anger and wounded pride had exhausted her vocabulary and powers of speech—which had not been until her own fingers had plucked that spurious growth of false affection from his heart, and had planted there the seeds of a fierce hatred and loathing of so distorted and contemptible a nature as this she manifested—he brought forth the fact and dangled it mercilessly before her eyes.

“ And how came these checks in your possession, then ! ” he asked, with stern brevity.

She was once more bold in denial.

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"They were never in my possession," said she.

"The clerks at the bank will swear that you presented them."

Alack ! she had been unmindful of this contingency. Women, unless trained to the profession, rarely practise gross fraud successfully. Their range of vision is not apt to cover the whole field of action. Like the foolish ostrich, they are prone painstakingly to conceal the immediate head of their offending while leaving the whole body of their past conduct exposed to attack. Neither do they sufficiently consider the necessity of covering up their tracks.

Cynthia turned a ghastly white, and her haughty effrontery deserted her ; yet she maintained a stubborn front.

"Then they lie !" she cried, with pale and trembling lips.

And then, for one brief instant, Van Vorst let go of himself. He stood before the woman he had married, and cursed her for the ruin she had brought upon his life. He denounced her as a felon, a false wife, a perjured woman, and cast her out of his further consideration as too contemptible to occupy his thoughts. He meted out to her, as well as words can measure sentiments, the actual value of his opinion of her and of his regard for her.

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And she confronted him, raging with passion and yet trembling with dread, until she had learned what were his purpose and intention. Then, assured that, out of regard for the honor of her sex in general, and because the law had made her his wife, and as there was a little child to suffer from the publication of her mother's disgrace, he would allow the charge against himself to stand, she turned from him with a cynical smile, as of disbelief in his magnanimity; and he left the room hastily, that he might not yield to an awful impulse that had laid hold of him to strike her as she stood there before him.

A real hero in a novel would never be permitted by its author to acknowledge, even to himself, that he had done anything exceptional or praiseworthy in sacrificing everything that men hold dear to a woman for whom he had no regard but that which a man pays to the symbol of an oath. But Murray Van Vorst was not a real hero. He appreciated at its full value the thing he had done. He had formed a very accurate estimate of the amount it had cost him. It was his only compensation to reflect that he had acted like a gentleman; but this compensation failed him often. He knew that, built as he was morally, he could not have done differently; that, if similar necessity should again constrain him, he should meet

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the new demand as he had met the old. And yet, although he never regretted that he had done what he had, being what he was, there were dark and bitter hours when he wished that he had been born with a less stringent sense of honor, a more unexacting standard of masculine rectitude.

And such an hour was on him now, as he sat, with his house swept and garnished, alone, hopeless, miserable, and despairing, ready to move it on the wheels of a restless and aimless purpose somewhere, anywhere, hither, yonder, in nomadic fashion, like the tent of an Arab ; to rest never long in any one spot, but to bring up where chance, or fate, or destiny might direct. Perhaps, although he did not credit the Almighty with interest in his future, it was to be as God directed—who knew ?

His cigar had gone out, and he had let it follow its own inclination. He was in that mood of supreme indifference in which one allows small matters as well as affairs of moment to shift for themselves. There was a sick sense of revolt against every circumstance of life in his heart. That parting with Charlotte Pendexter had been his final act of renunciation. The deluge was now upon him, and it might swamp him, if so it listed, or drift him to any spot in a universe whose whole surface was alike uncongenial to him. He was

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caught, just at this moment, in a tide of self-pity and despair.

Oh, if only he might have accepted that generous offer, and so have secured to himself the rare privilege and delight of the companionship of the woman he loved ! A caravan in a desert would have been home to him with her beside him. A tent pitched on a barren plain would have sufficed his requirements, could she but occupy it with him. He had no craving for the society of his kind : imprisonment had killed in him the gregarious instinct. He felt no attachment for any special spot on earth : Disgrace is a hunter that keeps his prey on the move.

But oh for one comprehending and sympathizing comrade, before whom his honor might stand forth in its integrity, in whose sight he should be what God had made him—a man, not a felon ; a martyr, not a criminal ! If he might have such a one ever beside him, to cheer, comfort, love, and console him, why, the rest of the world might go hang !—he asked nothing of it.

He sprang to his feet, and, with hands thrust into his pockets, began to pace the length of the room, with long, nervous strides.

Meanwhile Sylvia's cab had stopped before his door.

Bidding the driver await her return, the girl

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alighted and entered the narrow hall-way, where she found the janitor of the building reading a newspaper.

"I wish to go to Mr. Van Vorst's apartment," she said to him. "Do you know if he is at home?"

The man replied in the affirmative. Sylvia entered the elevator, and in another moment she stood demanding admission at her father's door.

Her summons was answered by a person who was vaguely familiar to her, but who apparently did not recognize her in the least. She afterwards remembered that years ago he had been employed by her father as a sort of general factotum, a kind of office servant and private errand-boy, whom she had frequently seen at her grandfather's house, to which he was often sent as bearer of communications from her father to her mother or grandfather.

She paid little heed to his identity now, however : her mind was occupied with more urgent matters.

"Can I see Mr. Van Vorst?" she asked, and a certain cadence in her voice revived long-buried associations in the servant's mind, causing him to scan more attentively this exceptional caller.

Sylvia mistook the hesitation occasioned by the man's efforts to establish her connection

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with bygone events for uncertainty as to his master's wishes regarding visitors.

"I am sure he will see me," she urged, impatiently : "I am his daughter."

"Miss Sylvia !" the man ejaculated ; and in an instant the identity of each was revealed to the other.

"Thomas !"

She held out her hand, and he took it deferentially into his.

"Oh, Miss Sylvie, we've got him back again after all these years !" he remarked, with a slight tremble in his voice.

The girl nodded assent to his words.

"Yes," she said ; "but where is he, Thomas ? I must see him at once."

And, as she lifted her face interrogatively to his, the servant saw how wan it looked, how troubled, pale, and agitated. Immediately, apprehension on his master's behalf was kindled in his mind.

"Miss Sylvie," he asked, anxiously, "it is nothing more come to him ?"

She shook her head reassuringly.

"No," she said ; "no. Where is he, Thomas ? Show me in at once, please."

The man delayed no longer. Preceding her down the hall-way which led to his master's sitting-room, he threw open the door of the apartment, and announced, in a hushed voice,

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"Miss Van Vorst to see you, sir," and retired, closing the door again promptly upon father and daughter.

Van Vorst was standing at a distant window, gazing out into the street. He turned in response to Thomas's announcement, wondering who his visitor was, a quick idea flashing through his mind that some distant and distressed relative might have come to apply to him, her rich kinsman, for aid. For, daughter of his as she was, Sylvia was associated in his mind exclusively with the name her mother had chosen to resume at the period of her divorce from him ; and, as her thick veil was somewhat of a disguise, he did not immediately recognize her.

A nearer approach, and the lifting of her veil, enlightened him.

"Sylvia !" he cried, and went rapidly forward, taking both her hands in his, with a quick, covetous gesture, that signified how strong was the paternal feeling the plundered father had for this child who had been stolen from him.

The girl shivered a little, as if she were very cold and the eager warmth of his clasp had made her suddenly conscious of it.

"Yes, it is I, papa," she replied, with little animation in her voice or look.

He wondered at this lack of gladness and

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enthusiasm in her, for he knew how ardently she had shared his desire that her mother's prohibition against their meeting should be removed, and occasional intercourse, at least, be permitted them.

He noticed, too, how unusual was the expression of her face, how spent and weary she looked, and how hollow and exhausted her voice sounded.

"You have had a struggle to make her consent, dear?" he asked, pulling forward the easiest chair the room afforded, and tenderly seating her. She allowed herself to sink into it, but, instead of resting luxuriously in its depths with an air of abandon and repose, as her father had expected she would do, she remained sitting bolt upright, gazing directly before her, with an abstracted look in her eyes.

"No, I could not persuade her," she replied, dully; "she has not consented."

"Then you have come in opposition to her wishes?" he inquired, gravely, for he neither wished nor intended to cultivate a spirit of disobedience in his daughter. He had old-fashioned ideas that a child's best safeguard lies in honoring the commands of its parents.

"Yes," she answered, still looking straight before her; "I have."

Then there fell a pause between them. The

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pleasure he had anticipated from those ardently coveted but long-denied interviews with this daughter whom throughout all the long, dreary years of his imprisonment and exile he had idealized beyond the possibility of any woman's fulfilment, seemed suddenly, even as he was about to taste it, to suffer a blight. Sylvia's joylessness and preoccupation were like a ghostly visitant at a feast, constraining him with vague dread and nameless apprehension.

Presently, moved to action by the increasing rigidity and pallor of her gentle face, he went to a buffet and filled a glass of wine. This, with some thin biscuits, he brought her upon a small salver.

"My little girl," he said, very softly and compassionately, "you look thoroughly exhausted. Drink this."

The tender concern so manifest in the tone of his offer went to Sylvia's heart. But she could neither eat nor drink, with that terrible lump of misery in her throat. She raised her hand with a beseeching gesture, repelling the proffered refreshment, and glancing suddenly up at him as she did so.

"My grandfather is dead," she contrived to say; adding, with piteous significance, "I know all the truth now."

And then she raised her upturned palms, and dropped her face into them, while her

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slender, girlish frame shook and strained and shivered beneath the stress of her great grief and shame.

At her words Van Vorst started, so that the little tray nearly fell from his hands. He placed it hastily on a table and went close to Sylvia, his countenance even more shaken and distraught than her own.

"Good God!" he cried; "what is this you say?"

Then, as he realized how fierce had been the blow dealt the child whom he loved with a solicitous affection that would have guarded her even from a harsh and unkindly breath, he stooped and laid his hand, a lean, quivering, but very gentle hand, upon her bowed head.

"Oh, my little Sylvia!" he whispered, softly and huskily; "my poor little child!"

And so they remained awhile, she weeping the first tears she had shed over her new shame and anguish, he standing close beside her, still, astonished, speechless, marvelling beyond measure at this new turn the tragedy of his life was taking.

After some moments, she raised a wretched, tear-stained face, and held up some pieces of paper for him to take. They were accompanied, and partially concealed, by an envelope, that which contained Samuel Yorke's last message to him, and at the first glance he

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failed to recognize them. Looking closer, he discovered what they were, and his hand shook as he stretched it forth and took them from Sylvia's grasp.

"Where did you get these, dear?" he asked.

"From my grandfather's dead hand," she whispered, being obliged to coerce her lips in order to make their burden intelligible.

"He is really dead—Mr. Yorke?" he proceeded, with exceeding gentleness, for he was fearful of scaring away her partially regained composure.

She nodded assent.

"And he told you, my little Sylvia, what these were?"

Immense as was his joy at the thought that his child's unswerving faith in him had been justified in its own sight by this confirmation of his integrity, yet he was resentful of the old man's conduct, and would willingly have sacrificed his own satisfaction in this unexpected joy to have spared her young heart the agony of realizing her mother's guilt.

She shook her head.

"No ; I—remembered—them," she faltered.

"Remembered them !" he echoed, incredulously. "I did not know that you had ever seen them before."

At this the girl rose suddenly from her seat, and a loud cry that was almost a wail burst

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from her lips. She turned quickly upon her father, and cast her slight young arms about his neck, leaning upon his breast and meeting his eyes nearly upon their own level ; for she was tall and straight as a young sapling, and he was somewhat bent and bowed from that habitual stoop in the shoulders occasioned by long carrying of the burden Fate had seen fit to lay upon them.

“Oh, my father, my father,” she cried ; “was it not I, after all, that sent you into imprisonment ?”

He regarded her with amazement that was voiceless in its intensity, with quick suspicion based on a horrible misgiving. Had her mind, that delicately organized structure of a carefully shielded girlhood, yielded to this sudden and extraordinary strain to which it had been exposed ? Had her words any sort of meaning ?—if so, what could it be ?

She noted the perplexity in his eyes, and sought to relieve it.

“Father,” she asked, with a sad attempt to steady her voice, “did you not know that I forged those checks ?”

“You !”

He held her from him, and gazed at her with great and painful solicitude. It was true, then, that excitement had turned her brain. But, wet and troubled though they were, the

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blue eyes that returned his look were inspired by reason and sanity. Their glance was steadfast, if wretched.

"Yes, I," she repeated. "That is my writing, every word of it."

His bewilderment remained unabated.

"But you—why, Sylvia, it is impossible! You were a mere child at that time." He spoke soothingly, for, notwithstanding her steadfast eyes, he yet believed her the victim of a suddenly disordered imagination.

"Yes, a child learning to write. This form was set me as a copy." Then, governed to a conclusion by the significance of her tone and look, Van Vorst, of a sudden, comprehended the whole truth.

"Oh, my God, curse her!" he cried, with such awful violence that the girl, leaning upon him, could feel the vibration of his voice ring through his frame. Passionate anger and rage against the false wife and mother, who had employed her prerogatives to ruin both husband and child, knotted the veins in his face and hands into huge, purple ridges. Into his eyes there flashed such a look of bitter hatred, an expression of such venomous desire for revenge, that Sylvia trembled, fearing the consequences of such resentment.

She raised a small hand and laid it impulsively upon his lips.

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“Hush, hush!” she pleaded, protestingly; “remember that, for all this, she is my mother!”

“How did she cozen you into doing such devil’s work?” he asked, glaring upon her so fiercely that, had she not known his wrath was aimed at another, she might have been moved to fear.

And then she related her little story, briefly, succinctly, rapidly. While she unfolded the treacherous plot, there issued ever and anon from his white, set lips anathemas against her who had made the innocent child the accomplice of her felonious scheme.

When Sylvia concluded, he took her little hands in his, and held her aloof from him, for he wished her wholly to recover herself before answering the question he was about to put to her, and he felt that the heavy, passionate beating of his heart, which he could feel throbbing in his breast like the screw of a mighty propeller, would perhaps constrain her sympathies unduly.

He had sacrificed enough. There is a limit to all things, patience, endurance, self-abnegation, as well as the lesser virtues. The time had come now for this child that had been born to himself and Cynthia Yorke to make choice between them. Opportunity now offered for this choice to be at once decided upon, and

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he was minded to seize it. Yet, hungrily as he craved her companionship, intensely as he felt his right to her and his need of her, he was unwilling to influence her in her decision. She must come to him freely, voluntarily, wholly of her own accord, or he would not have her at all.

When her face had in a measure regained its composure, and her eyes, those sweet, troubled blue eyes, had grown somewhat more serene, when the little fingers within his grasp lay quieter and less restless, and a tinge of color had crept again into the white cheeks, he addressed her.

"Sylvia," said he, very solemnly and earnestly, "I had never thought that events could conspire to make it possible for you to render judgment between your father and mother. I had never foreseen a contingency which should reveal the truth to you. I had hoped—I say it in all honesty and sincerity, as God is my witness—that respect for your mother might continue to exist in your breast throughout your life. Fate has ordered otherwise. The scales by which your faithful little heart refused to allow itself to be blinded to my integrity have dropped from your eyes, and allowed you to discover your mother's true character. Therefore are you competent to choose between her and me. You know what are her claims

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upon your filial duty ; you know mine. You are aware what need she has of you ; in that, she has an advantage over me, for I cannot expect that you should be able to fathom mine. But, nevertheless, I ask you now, being informed of the important points in our respective claims upon you, to choose between us,—to decide which you will hereafter cling to, obey, abide with, and honor.” He paused a moment ; the tone in which he continued was so full of suppressed entreaty that it was well-nigh irresistible.

“ Sylvia, this is the first reward, the only compensation, I have ever asked of Fate for what she has made me endure. If she grants me this, I will forgive her the rest ; I will be content to remain under the heavy shadow of disgrace the rest of my life. Shall I go away a little, my child, and give you time, or will you tell me now, which you will make choice of, which you will elect to cling to in future,—her or me, your mother or your father ? ”

The twilight was fast coming on, and shadows were already hovering about the more obscure corners of the room. A clock on the mantel ticked loudly, and the sound of its ticking seemed to Sylvia like the beating of a monstrous hammer upon her brain, her heart, her nerves, upon all her senses and consciousness. “ Which—which ? Which—which ? ” she

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thought its refrain rang, and she longed to cry out against it, bidding it cease, and not thus hasten and harass her decision.

Which—which? Which—which? Over and over again, the monosyllable was driven in upon her weary brain. She looked at her father. Here were rest, congeniality, harmony, love, and joy. She thought of her mother. There were disturbance, misunderstanding, strife, affection scarce worthy of the name, and trouble. Which—which? Which—which?

In the great crises of life, it is often some unimportant, some irrelevant trifle that points to a conclusion. Such now turned the balance of Sylvia's decision. She had dropped her eyes from their contemplation of her father's face, and they had chanced to fall upon a small white object that lay upon the rug, just where the hem of her gown touched it.

Van Vorst had been taking phenacetine for a nervous headache, and one of the small tablets had escaped from its phial and dropped upon the floor. In an instant that insidious habit to which her mother was addicted recurred to the girl's memory. And the recollection brought with it so strenuous an argument against deserting her mother, that she could not find strength or force within her sufficient to combat it conscientiously.

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Abandon her mother to an enemy that constantly menaced her very life ! Relinquish her into the hands of a vicious and deadly foe ! Retreat from that fight in which she was gallantly striving to defend a feeble soul from the effects of its own weakness ! Leave her mother to a fate perhaps worse than death itself, in order to gratify her own desires under cover of solacing her father's solitude ! She roused herself, and her blue eyes again grew moist with tears. Gently, but very lovingly, she placed her arms anew about Van Vorst's neck, and drew closely to him.

"My own dear father !" said she, in the tenderest tones her voice could assume, "there is no uncertainty in my heart as to which of my parents has fullest claim upon my respect, my reverence, and my love. My faith in you has never even needed corroborating, so strong has it always been ; but my reverence for you has increased so greatly that I feel scarcely worthy to call myself your daughter. I had not thought there lived a man capable of such self-abnegation as you have shown. Feeling thus, imagine what it is to me to be obliged to refuse the small compensation you ask at my hands, and to refuse it, too, for the sake of one who has allowed such self-sacrifice and has shown herself so unworthy and unappreciative of it. But, father, I must do it. I cannot, I

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dare not, leave my mother. Let me tell you why."

And then she informed him of that wretched habit which Cynthia had contracted. She told him how, by degrees, it had fastened itself upon her and made her in a measure its slave. She, Sylvia, alone had power to subdue its tyranny, to coax her mother to withstand its temptation and contend against its noxious spell. She told her tale simply, and yet with great force and moving eloquence. Her mother's danger lay fully exposed to Van Vorst's sight when she concluded. Then, in her turn, she made him arbiter of her future.

"Father," she said tenderly, with wistful regret and sorrow, "I have concluded in my own mind what it is right for me to do ; but I leave the final decision with you. What do you think? Can I, ought I, abandon her in her peril, even for your dear sake?"

And again poor Van Vorst was obliged to trample upon his own soul and answer, "No."





CHAPTER VIII.

WHEN the terms of old Samuel Yorke's will were made public, they created considerable comment. In the first place, they were published broadcast in all the principal dailies throughout the country, in accordance with directions given his executors, in a private letter of instructions addressed to them ; in the next place, they made the scantest provision for his daughter and only child, Cynthia Yorke, sometime called Cynthia Van Vorst ; and in the third place they appointed his beloved and highly respected friend, lately his son-in-law, Murray Van Vorst, to be sole trustee of the bulk of his large fortune, which was left for the use of his dear granddaughter, Sylvia Van Vorst, and her heirs and assigns forever. To this same beloved and highly respected Murray Van Vorst, lately his son-in-law, the old man likewise bequeathed a legacy in the shape of his own watch, the close companion of a lifetime, in token of his unavailing regret and remorse for

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a miserable and ruinous misconception and error in regard to Van Vorst, into which the testator had been betrayed some ten years previous to the date of the will. For this instrument had been but lately drawn up ; indeed, its date corresponded with that upon which Martha Melton had been consigned to jail, a day preceding Van Vorst's liberation by only a week.

It may be imagined how much gossip such a singular will occasioned, and what speculations were rife concerning it. Of course the appointment of a recently discharged felon to such a position of moral responsibility as that of sole trustee (without bonds) of a very considerable property was indicative of but two conclusions : either the old man was mad, and therefore the will could be successfully contested by her who had suffered most from its strange provisions, or old Yorke had discovered proof of the innocence of the man he had prosecuted for gross abuse of his confidence, but was unable to convince the world of his mistake by naming the real offender, and had therefore taken this means of protesting his belief in his son-in-law's honor.

It was expected by the community at large that the hardly entreated daughter would break the will ; and the sympathies of people generally, even of such as had no great liking for her (which meant most of those who were per-

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sonally acquainted with her), were much stirred in her behalf. But the will was probated without opposition ; the few legacies it contained were duly paid, and the executors made preparations to turn the trust over to him to whom it had been devised ; apparently the testament was to be allowed to stand as it had been framed. Then people began to wonder and speculate in earnest.

Murray Van Vorst, still drifting with the tide, had been caught in this new current, which withheld him from carrying out his peregrinatory intentions. One day he met an old friend upon the street. This gentleman, instead of passing him with that mere nod of recognition to which he was growing accustomed as the usual salutation of those whose acquaintance he really valued, accosted and joined him.

"I say, Murray," he said, after a few casual remarks had been exchanged between them, "why don't you join a club?"

Van Vorst had repressed a thrill at the sound of his Christian name ; it was long since he had been thus addressed by his associates. He also crowded down all signs of exultation over the proposition couched in Trowbridge's question, although he well comprehended of what vast potentialities of recovered social standing it was significant. He knocked an

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orange-peel off the sidewalk with his cane before replying.

"Which?" he then asked, carelessly.

He was putting his pretensions to a very considerable test. No one knew better than he the grade of the various clubs in New York. He wished to discover to what degree in the scale his friend considered him justified in pretending. It would signify to him how influential had been old Yorke's implied acknowledgment of his probity.

For an instant Trowbridge hesitated. Then he made answer briefly but directly, naming two of the most select among the many clubs of the city. Van Vorst's face flushed. He could not control that tacit admission of his gratification. Otherwise his pride constrained him.

"H'm! Well," he returned, reflectively, "I don't think I will—yet: would you?"

The situation might have been an awkward one for a man less frank and impulsive than Morton Trowbridge. He met it squarely, however, and so avoided its embarrassment.

"Yes, I would," he replied. "You don't know how far old Yorke's will has gone toward reinstating you, my dear fellow. We've always liked you, Murray, but, confound it! what were we to do when you allowed yourself to be sent to jail, don't you know?"

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Van Vorst nodded.

"Quite so," he responded. "I don't blame any of you ; I never did. I couldn't expect any man to care about reckoning a jailbird among his acquaintances. I should fight shy of creatures of striped plumage myself."

His former friend regarded him narrowly. He was really very much interested in him, and would have been glad to be the means of restoring him to the good fellowship of his own set.

"But, Murray," he said, "why don't you just admit your innocence? You needn't mention the real offender ; that is not at all necessary. Just confirm what your father-in-law has implied, by your own word of honor, and every one will be satisfied."

Van Vorst at that moment lifted his hat to Charlotte Pendexter, who was passing in her victoria. Satan was emphasizing his temptations. The honor of his fellow-men, in whose regard it is the ambition of every right-minded man to stand well, and the love of woman, which, in this particular instance, he craved beyond measure, were being united into a subtle and powerful attempt upon his strength of resistance. He knit his brow. Then, "*Retro, Satanas !*" he muttered, half audibly ; and aloud, "Would they? Not every one, I think," he said. "I know of one man who

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would not. No,—thanks, old man," he continued, warmly, "but the time for my reinstatement is not ripe yet ; I don't know that it ever will be. Certainly it won't if it depends upon my asseverations to bring it about. I am what I have always been. Circumstances have worked against me ; circumstances may work for me. If they do, I admit I shall be glad. If they do not—why, I have been about as low in my mind concerning myself as I am ever likely to be, and so, I presume, I shall be able to pull through, somehow."

Since that scene beside her grandfather's death-bed, no words had ever passed between Sylvia and her mother concerning the girl's discovery. It was impossible for her to broach the subject, and no good could result from so doing. The matter was too involved for her analysis ; she could hardly desire that her father's rehabilitation should be purchased by the disclosure of her mother's criminality.

It was a dark hour for Sylvia,—quite the darkest and dreariest through which her young life had ever watched. Between herself and her mother there rose a partition bristling with thorns,—a very cactus-hedge of separation. Lennox was still forbidden the house, and she had no mind to ask favors of her mother, feeling as she did toward her. Charlotte she dared not visit, fearing lest the sweet sympathy of her

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friend should cause her to betray that horrible secret upon the preservation of which her mother's fair fame depended. Even had she known that Charlotte was aware of the truth, natural reserve and filial consideration would have withheld her from discussing her mother, even with her nearest friend.

Therefore she remained close within the house, occupying herself with the duty she had undertaken, but which became daily more difficult of fulfilment ; for Cynthia had been sorely harassed by her father's will, and sought relief from the exposure with which she felt it menaced her in that seductive charm which was one of the most dangerous attributes of her deadly enemy. She was continually apprehensive lest conjecture, set afloat by the fact that old Yorke had chosen to pay her divorced husband the highest tribute of respect at his command, should light upon her as the one person whom both these men felt it necessary to shield. A guilty conscience breeds a fearful spirit, and even in the respectful glances of her servants Cynthia began to imagine she detected suspicion and surmise.

Under such circumstances it was not strange that the nervous creature had constant recourse to morphine. Beneath its influence she gained a certain ability to meet the exigencies of her wretched situation, or at least to regard them

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with comparative indifference. She would have been glad for Sylvia to go out more. The girl's presence annoyed and coerced her. It carried accusation with it, besides being a curb upon her inclination. Her maid, a Frenchwoman of calibre much resembling her own, was amply sufficient for her requirements, both in the matter of assistance and companionship. Mrs. Yorke was the sort of woman who has no scruples about gossiping with her servants ; she quite enjoyed their conversation, and liberally encouraged it.

Sylvia's society made her nervous, and she avoided intercourse with her as much as possible ; Suzanne's tranquillized and entertained her ; besides which the wily Frenchwoman encouraged the injurious propensity, indulgence in which made her mistress a more endurable person to live with than she would otherwise have been.

The only occasion upon which Sylvia made the slightest allusion to the miserable facts she had discovered in the hour of her grandfather's death, occurred one day about a week after the old man was laid at rest. She had been forced into this necessity by a sense of justice, as well as by affectionate solicitude for one who had served her and hers long and faithfully,—one who was now languishing in jail, an innocent victim of that fearful unscrupulosity which had

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driven Cynthia to sacrifice to her miserable and paltry ambition those who had the strongest claims upon her consideration.

Awakened to the knowledge that her mother was capable of great crimes, Sylvia had immediately concluded her to be the perpetrator of that meaner and more paltry one the onus of which had been cast upon the honest shoulders of her seamstress. To release Martha from unjust imprisonment had long been one of the strongest desires of the girl's heart; now, being the daughter of Cynthia Yorke, she felt her honor engaged to accomplish that release. Intercourse, of any nature, with her mother had grown exceedingly painful to her. The positions of parent and child had become reversed, and nothing is more constraining than an abnormal relationship. The daughter had become the judge and superior, the mother the culprit and subordinate. What conversation took place between them had to be carefully chosen from a range of topics exceedingly limited, that none should bear upon a subject whose consideration embarrassed both in nearly equal measure.

She had been obliged to reinforce her courage by constant reflection upon the outrageous injury done the faithful old woman by the mother, whom even now it was her impulse to spare as much as possible, in order to bring it to the

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point of broaching the matter to Mrs. Yorke. Finally, however, one morning, she mastered her reluctance and invaded her mother's chamber, determined not to leave it until she had secured the means of Martha's release.

Cynthia was lying on a sofa, with a novel in her hand. The windows were carefully shaded, but even in the subdued light it was apparent that morphine and apprehension together had worked great havoc in her looks. All the devices of a profession in which her tiring-woman excelled were powerless to hide the sad ravages a few days had made upon her person. There was a terrible struggle of conflicting emotions going on in Sylvia's breast as she stood beside the lounge and gazed down upon that mother who, for all her despicable crimes, was yet a being to whom she had grown attached with a certain perfunctory affection, which, if not the highest type of filial love, was yet in a manner sacred and tenacious of its object.

A vast pity for that moral weakness and distortion which could have contemplated and committed such perfidy, a profound yearning to discover in her mother some sign of repentance and remorse grounded on a more worthy motive than that of self-consideration, an involuntary shrinking from one capable of such evil as Cynthia had wrought, a longing to win her to acknowledge her faults and ask for-

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givenness of those whom they had most potently afflicted, aversion, commiseration, repulsion, solicitude,—all these emotions, dominated by the necessity of compelling her mother to perform an action which would be most distasteful to her, warred together within Sylvia's being.

She greeted her mother, who replied fretfully, with her face turned aside: she never had voluntarily met her daughter's eyes since that moment when Sylvia's accusing glance had revealed her knowledge of the truth. Then, without circumlocution, the girl went at once to the point.

"Mother," she said, bluntly, "I have come to say to you that Martha must be released from prison at once."

A dark flush put to shame the rouge on Mrs. Yorke's face.

"What have I to do with it?" she asked, sullenly, still with her eyes turned aside.

"Everything."

There was no combating the menace suggested by that trisyllable. Cynthia had some time since confessed herself a captive. What use was there in a mere rattling of her chains! The action gained her nothing. Submission was her easiest course.

"What shall I do?" Her tone was still sulky and fretful. She had really, through the effects of morphine and a weak collapse of

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spirit, become indifferent to all things but peace. If they would merely let her alone, she cared not what they did. Her energies, vain and obstinate, but never very powerful, had been completely sapped by the insidious drug.

Sylvia's answer was ready. She had studied her subject carefully for many days.

"You will sign a deposition which I have drawn up, that the money never was stolen ; that it was mislaid, was not taken from the drawer at all ; that it has been recently discovered in another place. It is not the actual truth, but——"

She paused. She was still outwardly respectful and considerate of their relationship, therefore she would not add the words that came to her lips, "you will not mind that."

Her mother made a little impatient movement with her hands.

"Well, well," she said, "give me the paper and a pen. Shall I have any further bother about it? I am tired out, Sylvia, and can't go through any more worry and trouble."

And then she began to cry weakly, and the girl thought her mood was perhaps of a penitent nature, and was prompted to take advantage of it, being of all things in the world most desirous of saving from utter wretchedness and despair this pitiful and treacherous

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soul whom she hoped yet to reform. She fell upon her knees beside the couch, cast her strong young arms about the slight and wasted form, and on the bosom which had scarcely ever beaten with a generous and unselfish impulse she laid her pretty head, sadly wearied and troubled with the cares and sorrows that had crowded into the past fortnight, looking into that mean and whimpering countenance, which was even now tear-stained solely upon its own account, with tender, yearning eyes which sought to discover some token of a contrite spirit in the familiar lineaments.

"Mamma, oh, mamma!" she cried, "no wonder you are tired and worried! Dear, if you could know how my heart aches for you, how gladly I would spare you all this awful suffering, if I only might! There is yet a possibility of gaining peace through a partial atonement. Oh, mamma! if you would only seize it. My father——"

But at this Cynthia had pushed her away.

"That will do!" she burst forth. "I am in no condition for a scene. Give me your paper and a pen. I will sign it, since I must. Then you may ring for Suzanne. She is the only being in the world who has any consideration for me." And she again fell to crying feebly, the shallows of her nature much stirred by *pitié de soi-même*.

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About a week after this, Van Vorst presented himself at Mrs. Yorke's door. He had sent her a note informing her that it was necessary he should see her, in order to discuss certain matters relating to the trusteeship, which he had determined to accept, believing it for his daughter's interest that he should do so. He was also quite willing to accept the slight reparation which old Samuel Yorke had been willing to make him.

There was a brougham standing before the steps, and the liveries of its servants he recognized as belonging to Mrs. Pendexter. As he was shown into the drawing-room, he discovered Charlotte conversing with Sylvia. Both women rose as he entered, and the girl came forward, welcoming him with a warm embrace.

"Oh, papa!" she cried, a pretty flush of pleasure rising upon a face that was nowadays rarely tinged with color, "it is good to see you here!"

And, with her left hand still clasping his, she led him forward to greet Charlotte. As the man and the woman shook hands, the girl stood between them, with her right arm thrown lovingly about her friend's waist. There was a significance in the grouping which was felt by Charlotte and Van Vorst, but which, because she was ignorant of that great desire for union that lay in the hearts of these two whom

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she so dearly loved, escaped Sylvia. Nevertheless, she felt the harmony of their mutual attitude, for she gave a gentle little laugh as they stood so grouped, and said, "Oh, I have not felt so happy for a long time," pressing affectionately the hand she held.

Then she let go her hold of both, and stooped to pick up a bunch of violets that had dropped from Charlotte's bosom when she rose to welcome Van Vorst. As she drew herself again erect, something, perhaps the fact that the two had not, according to convention, released each other's clasp, but still stood with hand grasping hand, perhaps merely an impulse to see if they shared her pleasure in the reunion, —some vague and fleeting thought,—prompted her to flash a sudden, swift glance from one face to the other.

And then a clutch seemed to grip her soul, and she drew in her breath with a sharp "Oh!" as of quick comprehension. Obtuse indeed would have been the intelligence that could not construe the meaning in those faces. The joy of meeting could not but escape from the eyes of both.

Sylvia drew aside. Jealousy, even of this her nearest friend, was gnawing at her heart. Charlotte threw a look at Van Vorst. Better than the man, the woman comprehended what a blow had been dealt Sylvia. She withdrew

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her hand from his, and moved over to where the girl stood. Then she put out her arms, and drew her into them.

"Sylvia," she said, kissing the averted brow, "forgive me, dear. How could I know him and not love him? Pity me, too, for he will not let me be his wife."

At this the girl's heart melted. Perhaps—for she was only human, despite her loveliness of character and charity of thought—it was some solace to her to know that she bore, and would continue to bear, the nearer relationship to him they both loved. She returned Charlotte's kiss, and then dismissed the subject. She was not yet prepared to contemplate it unmoved.

"I will go and see if mamma will see you," she said, quietly, addressing her father. "Don't go, Charlotte: we will talk together a little when I come back."

When she had gone, Mrs. Pendexter again held out her hand to Van Vorst.

"Oh, I have heard the good news of the will," she said. "I have read its terms over and over again, with tears in my eyes; and, Murray, I am glad! Oh, my beloved, I am glad!"

Even as she spoke, bright, tender drops of joy hung on her beautiful lashes.

Van Vorst raised the hand she would have given him to be his forever, to his lips.

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"Dear, I know it," he replied.

"Will you not have me, even now, Murray?" she pleaded.

He shook his head.

"No ; not yet," he returned, resolutely, but softening the denial with a glance of passionate appreciation.

She sighed deeply, and the tears fell from the net-work which had held them, and rolled slowly down her cheeks.

"Not yet !" repeated she. "You speak as if some time——" She broke off, and then went on, in a tone almost of chiding, "Your pride is too great, Murray. Men speak well of you now. There would be no shame to-day in being your wife. Already people surmise ; they suspect, and their suspicions exonerate you. When will you yield, Murray ? You imply that there will come a time. When shall it be ?—when ? My beloved, I am impatient of delay."

He drew her to him and kissed her brow tenderly, lingeringly.

"I do not know," he said. "I cannot speak with certainty. I only feel that some day, perhaps not far distant, you will be my wife, and I your husband."

Then he released her, for they heard Sylvia returning with swift step, so swift that it seemed to bode some stress or urgency. They turned

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quickly, and met her glance as she came, almost running, up the long room toward them.

Her face was like death, white with an awful pallor ; her breath came in gasps, and her whole frame was a-tremble with powerful emotion. As she neared them, with one impulse they started forward to meet her.

“What—what is it, Sylvia?” Charlotte asked, in an awed whisper ; for there was in the white face that which challenged alarm.

The girl made an effort to speak,—a vain attempt. Once again she strove fruitlessly. Her mouth was parched and dry ; her tongue was paralyzed. Her blue eyes made an appeal to them that they should comprehend her tidings by their means only. Charlotte threw her arms about her, and at the human touch the girl’s forces seemed restored.

“Mamma—oh, mamma is dead !” she cried. “Suzanne has made an awful mistake in her medicine. Send for a doctor—oh, go !” she besought, turning to Van Vorst. Then a great wail rose from her heart. “It is too late ! too late !” she moaned. “It is death !—they all say so. Oh, my mother ! my mother !” And she fell forward, inert and helpless, into the arms that held her ; and, together, Charlotte Pendexter and Murray Van Vorst carried her to a couch and laid her upon it.

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One moment they paused above her prostrate form before seeking to restore her, and gazed into each other's eyes. One glance asked a question ; the other answered it.

"Will you be a mother to her such as she has never known?" asked the man's.

And the woman's vowed, "I will, I will. Trust me. She shall be as my own child : I swear it."



THE END.

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